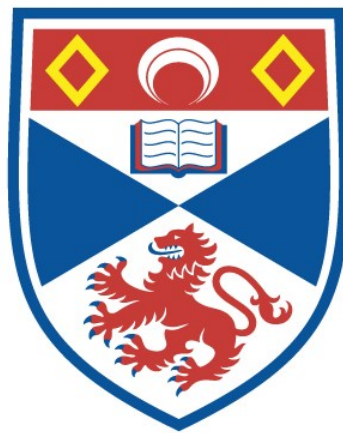


MULTIVALENCE, LIMINALITY, AND THE THEOLOGICAL IMAGINATION: CONTEXTUALISING THE IMAGE OF FIRE FOR CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIAN PRACTICE

Rebekah Mary Dyer

A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of PhD
at the
University of St Andrews



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Multivalence, Liminality, and the Theological Imagination:
Contextualising the image of fire for contemporary Christian practice

Rebekah Mary Dyer



University of
St Andrews

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfilment for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)

at the University of St Andrews

June 2018

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Abstract

This thesis contends that the image of fire is a multivalent and theologically valuable image for application in British Christian communities. My research offers an original contribution by contextualising the image of fire for Christian practice in Britain, and combining critical observation of several contemporary fire rites with theological analysis. In addition, I conduct original case studies of three Scottish fire rituals: the Stonehaven Fireball Ceremony, the Beltane Fire Festival, and Up-Helly-Aa in Lerwick, Shetland.

The potential contribution of fire imagery to Christian practice has been overlooked by modern theological scholarship, social anthropologists, and Christian practitioners. Since the multivalence of the image has not been fully recognised, fire imagery has often been reduced to a binary of 'positive' and 'negative' associations. Through my study of non-faith fire rituals and existing Christian fire practices, I explore the interplay between multivalence, multiplicity, and liminality in fire imagery. I demonstrate that deeper theological engagement with the image of fire can enhance participation, transformation, and reflection in transitional ritual experience.

I argue that engaging with the multivalence of the image of fire could allow faith communities to move beyond dominant interpretive frameworks and apply the image within their own specific context. First, I orientate the discussion by examining the multivalence of biblical fire imagery and establishing the character of fire within the British social imagination. Second, I use critical observation of community fire practices in non-faith contexts to build a new contextual framework for the analysis of fire imagery. Finally, I apply my findings to a contextual analysis of existing Christian fire practices in Britain. Throughout, I argue that sensory and imaginative interaction with the image of fire provides a way to communicate and interact with theological ideas; experience personal and communal change; and mediate experience of the sacred.

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The research involved in this thesis has given me some stories to tell, not least about those friends, family, and colleagues who have aided and inspired me. I am unable to tell most of those stories here, but I'd like to take a moment to express my gratitude to everyone who has helped me bring this thesis into existence.

My thanks to the research community of the Institute for Theology, Imagination and the Arts (ITIA) at St Mary's College, University of St Andrews, which has been my academic home since my M.Litt. studies in 2010-11. Thanks are especially due to Professor David Brown, who saw great potential in fire and the multivalence of imagery.

I am all too aware of my privilege in being able to undertake research in a subject I love, and which has shaped me so profoundly over the years. I am more privileged still to find a research environment which has embraced the slightly esoteric, and at times frankly unpredictable, nature of my chosen research.

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My research only came into being thanks to a ‘confluence of influences.’ To describe them all would be to embark on a memoir which would rival this thesis in length, so I will restrict myself to a few honourable mentions.

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My thanks go also to the reader (if there ever is such a person) for making use of this research. May it prove illuminating to your own endeavours, whatever they may be.

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I am grateful for the use of photographs and video footage captured by Scott A. McDonald, as contained and credited in the appendices. Copyright remains with the content creator. Used with permission.

Dedication

*In loving memory of my grandparents,
Ron and Nora Scott & Iris and Stan Dyer*

Chapter 1: Thesis Introduction

Fire is a signature image of some of the Bible's most pivotal narratives. God is revealed in fire at the burning bush, delivers the law to Moses on a mountain shrouded in smoke and flame, and sends fire from heaven to consume Elijah's water-soaked offering before the priests of Baal (Exodus 3; Exodus 19; and 1 Kings 18 respectively). As Jesus' disciples gather at Pentecost, the Holy Spirit appears among them like tongues of flame (Acts 2). As a prominent biblical image with wide-ranging theological significance, the image of fire should be of considerable interest to academic theology; yet theological engagement with the image of fire is notably absent from much of contemporary Christian thought. In church praxis, fire is often physically absent except for the use of candles. Even then, not all Christian communities use candles in worship, and battery-operated substitutes provide a safer option for those that do. Despite its multifaceted biblical applications, 'fire has seldom been effectively integrated into the Christian symbolic system' either physically or conceptually.¹

This thesis argues that the image of fire has considerable theological and imaginative potential which has been overlooked by theologians and Christian practitioners alike. I suggest that the application of the image of fire in Christian practice can be validated both theologically and anthropologically through attention to its multivalence (that is, its capacity to convey a variety of meanings often simultaneously). Hence, my research is guided by the following question: *How might the multivalence of the image of fire contribute to theological and imaginative engagement in Christian practice in 21st century Britain?* As well as addressing a general lack of attention to fire and fire imagery in the discipline of theology, my research offers an original contribution to ritual studies and social anthropology by contextualising the image of fire as it is constructed within the contemporary British imagination.

In part, the relative absence of fire in Christian practice can be attributed to practical considerations pertaining to safety and technical knowledge. However, it is not coincidental that the presence of fire also lacks the theological underpinning which would make its application liturgically viable. The neglect of the image of fire in contemporary academic theology is at odds with the treatment of other natural images, such as water. Like fire, the

¹ Adrian Hastings, "Fire," in *The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought*, ed. Adrian Hastings et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 242.

image of water is associated with both judgement and purification in the Bible.² Nevertheless, water-based imagery resides more comfortably within the Christian imagination when compared with fire imagery.³ In Christian practice, water has become an enduring symbol of new life through its role in the rite of baptism. By contrast, fire has become a source of theological and social anxiety.⁴ Where the image of fire is considered, academic approaches prefer to elucidate the abstract and symbolic dimensions of fire imagery rather than grounding the significance of fire in its tangible existence.⁵

The physical presence of fire in Christian practice may be an uncomfortable proposition. The Christian church has a troubling history with the use of fire, not least in the burning of thousands of ‘heretics’ during the conflicts of the Reformation era.⁶ The attitude of British society towards the presence of live flames is likewise conflicted. At the time of writing, one particular conflagration dominates British headlines: the conflagration of a tower block in west London, known as Grenfell Tower, which claimed dozens of lives and devastated a community.⁷ Fire inspires both fear and fascination in contemporary life. The precise measure of fear and fascination is determined by its context: the fire’s location, intensity, and effects.

By exploring the complex role of fire in the contemporary British imagination, this thesis proposes that the integration of fire in Christian practice is validated, and made possible, through theological engagement with the multivalence of the image of fire. Throughout, I will challenge existing schemas which reduce the image of fire to a binary of ‘positive’ and

² See, for example, Genesis 7; Jonah 1; 2 Kings 5.

³ In Boadt and Smith’s collection of essays on biblical imagery, three chapters are dedicated to water-based imagery. There are none given over to fire. See Lawrence Boadt and Mark S. Smith, eds., *Imagery and Imagination in Biblical Literature: Essays in Honor of Aloysius Fitzgerald, F.S.C.*, The Catholic Biblical Quarterly Monograph Series 32 (Washington, DC: The Catholic Biblical Association of America, 2001).

⁴ As discussed in Chapters 3 and 6.

⁵ Stephen J. Pyne, *Fire: Nature and Culture* (London: Reaktion Books, 2012), 152. Further analysis of the available literature is presented in the following section.

⁶ Hastings, “Fire,” 242.

⁷ “London fire: What happened at Grenfell Tower?” BBC News, 19 July 2017, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-london-40272168>.

‘negative’ connotations. Conceptualising the image as multivalent will reveal the scope for new interpretive possibilities and offer a distinctive hermeneutical perspective applicable to Christian thought and practice. Ultimately, this thesis will argue that the image of fire has extensive theological potential; but that this potential may only be accessed by developing and articulating a thoroughgoing theological hermeneutic by which to understand the image of fire in a contemporary Christian context. (The term ‘contemporary’ is used regularly throughout the thesis, and always functions as short-hand for ‘contemporary to 21st century British society.’)

To properly address the image of fire as it relates to Christian practice, we must undertake the work of contextualisation (beginning in Chapter 2). This means forming an understanding of contextual factors which influence the presentation and reception of fire and fire imagery. My findings will pave the way for further exploratory work from the perspectives of practical theology, biblical hermeneutics, and liturgical and ritual studies.

First, I will examine the multivalence of fire in biblical fire imagery, addressing the tendency of modern scholarship to interpret fire in the Bible according to ‘positive’ or ‘negative’ theological associations (Chapter 2). By focusing on the image’s multivalence, I will challenge this over-simplistic view of fire’s theological significance by placing biblical fire imagery within a wider schema of human-divine interaction. As Christianity’s sacred text, biblical fire imagery (and its reception) forms one imaginative context for contemporary Christian practice; modern society constitutes another. I will provide a survey of the role of fire in 21st century British society, arguing that it remains a multivocal image despite the decline of domestic fires in Britain (Chapter 3). Together, these two chapters will establish the validity and relevance of the image of fire for Christian thought and practice through its multivalence.

Against this cultural and social background, I will consider how the image of fire has been utilised in certain community contexts to reveal a range of contemporary associations with the image of fire, relating to communication, transformation, and a sense of presence (Chapter 4). Using observational analysis, I will conduct original research on three British fire rituals to consider ways in which the image of fire has been used to facilitate communal explorations of belonging, identity formation, and transition (Chapter 5). Each chapter will help situate the image of fire within its contemporary imaginative context, demonstrating

the need for adequate interpretive tools to facilitate theological and imaginative engagement with the image of fire. I will apply my findings to the analysis of existing Christian fire practices, suggesting ways in which Christian communities may further develop theological encounters with the image of fire (Chapter 6).

In this introduction, I will first conduct a brief review of the major existing works on fire and fire imagery. I will then describe the key concepts used in the thesis, followed by an outline of my methodology. By the end of this chapter, we will have developed a functional understanding of the image of fire and the critical approaches that will be used to examine the image of fire in contemporary practice. I will conclude my introduction with an overview of the structure and content of the thesis.

1. Critical review

In the following critical review, I will provide an overview of relevant contributions to my field of study. The study of fire in human society and imagination is not contained within one discipline, but relates to philosophy, chemistry, environmental science, social anthropology, ritual studies, theology, and the arts — to name only a few examples. Despite the interdisciplinary nature of the subject, there has been little co-operation between theological and non-theological approaches with regard to the image of fire, as I will demonstrate below.

This literature survey will trace the modern study of the human relationship with fire from its early 20th century beginnings in anthropology and psychology to its present form, which incorporates environmental science, social anthropology, and discourse analysis. I will then discuss the relative absence of fire in 20th and 21st century theology, and the limitations of existing theological methods for analysing the image of fire. I will conclude the review by pointing to ways this thesis will bridge the gap between non-theological approaches to fire and existing theological perspectives.

The anthropological research of Sir James George Frazer was the forerunner of the 20th century effort to understand the human relationship with fire. Today, it is rare to find a volume on fire in ritual (or, indeed, fire and culture in general) which does not acknowledge his detailed work on the traditional folk beliefs and practices of northern Europe and beyond. Much of Frazer's research on fire in folk practices was collected in his famous work, *The*

Golden Bough.⁸ This sizeable compendium of folk traditions was first produced in 1890, with several updated versions and abridged editions published in the decades to follow. Frazer, a Scottish folklorist and anthropologist, later penned an essay entitled *Myths of the Origin of Fire* (first published in 1930) which catalogues fire creation myths from around the world.⁹

The Golden Bough has been described as ‘one of the most influential works in the twentieth century’ with a lasting impact on western literature in particular.¹⁰ In this work, Frazer seeks to uncover the hidden symbolic meanings underlying the rituals he describes. Frazer puts forward several theories which might explain how and why each rite is practiced before attempting to persuade the reader in favour of his preferred interpretation.¹¹ His evidence is based on scholarly interaction with other anthropologists and his own observations. Since Frazer is preoccupied with uncovering the underlying rationale for each fire practice, the image of fire is presented rather rigidly and with little ambiguity. In the case of midsummer ‘need-fires,’ for example, Frazer details two possible explanatory theories.¹² These are the ‘solar theory,’ which suggests that the purpose of the need-fire was to evoke the power of the sun for the coming harvest; and the ‘purificatory theory,’ in which the need-fire is a means of ritual purification for the land and community.¹³ Frazer sets these up as competing (though not necessarily mutually exclusive) hypotheses. In his pursuit of an explanatory model, he reduces the multivalence of the image of fire to one or two preferred meanings.

Much of the literature outlined below refers to Frazer’s research. It is necessary to understand that his books and essays are not only a record of traditional beliefs and practices. They are historical sources in their own right, representing the rationalist,

⁸ James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study of Magic and Religion* (1922 Abridged edition, Project Gutenberg eBook, Kindle edition), accessed 24 April 2017, <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/3623>.

⁹ James George Frazer, *Myths of the Origin of Fire: An Essay* (London: MacMillan, 1930).

¹⁰ John B. Vickery, *The Literary Impact of The Golden Bough* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), 3.

¹¹ As in Frazer’s discussion of midsummer fire festivals. See Frazer, *Golden Bough*, chap. 63.

¹² Later discussions on this type of fire will use the alternative rendering, ‘neid fire,’ in line with relevant contemporary sources.

¹³ Frazer, *Golden Bough*, chap. 63.

demythologising approach of Frazer's late 19th and early 20th century intellectual sphere.¹⁴ *The Golden Bough* was composed from within a colonial worldview and may be rightly critiqued for its tone of condescension towards the 'superstitions' of traditional ritual practices.¹⁵ Ludwig Wittgenstein lamented the inability of Frazer to decentralise his own ideological perspective in order to provide room for other social structures and belief systems.¹⁶ Without due consideration of cultural and ideological context, Frazer's hypotheses impose artificial frameworks onto the subject matter, obscuring the interchange between imagery, community, and custom.¹⁷

The work of 20th century French philosopher Gaston Bachelard has also proven influential to the study of fire in human thought and culture. His psychoanalytic approach, which prioritises the concepts and emotions elicited by fire, markedly contrasts Frazer's rationalism. Bachelard's enduring fascination with fire as a potent psychological image led him to write *La Psychanalyse du Feu* in 1938, to be translated into English as *The Psychoanalysis of Fire*.¹⁸ This was followed by *La Flamme d'une Chandelle* in 1961, later translated into English as *The Flame of a Candle*.¹⁹ An unfinished draft of a third volume was posthumously published as *Fragments d'une Poétique du Feu*, translated as *Fragments of a Poetics of Fire*, in 1988.²⁰ In each of these works, Bachelard contemplates the relationship between the image of fire and the (western) human psyche. He not only recognises fire as a means of expressing certain human

¹⁴ Vickery, *Impact*, 4.

¹⁵ Frazer, *Golden Bough*, chap. 62.

¹⁶ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough*, trans. A. C. Miles, revised by Rush Rhees (Swansea: Brynmill, 1979), 5e. (The pagination of this bilingual volume indicates the English translation with the page number followed by 'e'.)

¹⁷ Wittgenstein, *Remarks*, 14e.

¹⁸ Gaston Bachelard, *The Psychoanalysis of Fire*, trans. Alan C. M. Ross (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964).

¹⁹ Gaston Bachelard, *The Flame of a Candle*, trans. Joni Caldwell (Dallas: Dallas Institute, 1988; repr. 2012).

²⁰ Gaston Bachelard, *Fragments of a Poetics of Fire*, ed. Suzanne Bachelard, trans. Kenneth Haltman (Dallas: Dallas Institute, 1990).

experiences, but considers fire a phenomenon whose presence elicits a psychological response in the beholder.²¹

Bachelard is often quoted in more recent publications on fire and fire imagery, perhaps due to his poetic, philosophical style and intensely personal reflections on fire. In his above-mentioned works, Bachelard often deals with myths: classical myths pertaining to the nature and origins of fire, as well as his own personal myth-building which characterises the flame as uniquely inspirational to the philosopher.²² After all, remarks the author, '[o]ne can hardly conceive of a philosophy of repose that would not include a reverie before a flaming log fire.'²³ His prose overflows with fire imagery, bringing the multiplicity of the image to the fore and inviting the reader to engage imaginatively and intellectually with the subject matter.

Bachelard explicitly associates the image of fire with life, death, and purification.²⁴ His valorisation of fire and preoccupation with its ability to evoke reverie means that fire is rarely contextualised in any particular social setting. He asserts that fire 'takes on cosmic value' by eliciting consideration of the cosmos; hence, 'it functions as a vertiginous thought. Such an image-thought or thought-image has no need of context.'²⁵ In an earlier volume, however, Bachelard critiques Frazer's explanation of traditional Beltane bonfires for failing to take context into account. Like Wittgenstein, Bachelard argued that *The Golden Bough* engages insufficiently with the worldview of the practitioners of fire rituals. From Bachelard's psychoanalytic perspective, Frazer's research also overlooks the sexual dimensions of the imagery.²⁶ Although Bachelard claims the supremacy of psychoanalysis for understanding the human relationship with fire, his presentation of the image tends not to extend further than his own philosophical and aesthetic sensibilities permit.²⁷ In particular, Bachelard neglects to

²¹ Bachelard, *Psychoanalysis*, 7; 16-18.

²² For example: Bachelard, *Fragments*, 14-16; Bachelard, *Psychoanalysis*, 46-47.

²³ Bachelard, *Psychoanalysis*, 14.

²⁴ Bachelard, *Flame*, 16; 20.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 15.

²⁶ Bachelard, *Psychoanalysis*, 33-35.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 35.

engage with fire as an indiscriminate agent of destruction. The existential danger presented by flames raging out of control is not easily incorporated into his philosophy of reverie. While his embrace of emotional subjectivity is of interest to our inquiry regarding fire in the imagination, Bachelard's introspective methodology stands in contrast to more dispassionate approaches of modern scholarship.²⁸

Major works of the late 20th century onwards have done more to situate the image of fire in historical and social contexts. There is little scholarly literature on the subject of fire to be found from the time of Bachelard until the 1990s, when fire (and especially wildfires) came into focus for the disciplines of cultural history and environmental science. Stephen J. Pyne has produced a number of books which are concerned with the ways in which fire and human culture have influenced one another over the course of history. Pyne considers the ways fire has been put to use for human survival, energy production, and industry, as well as how fire has shaped the development of agriculture, architecture, and myth. Fire is addressed within its environmental context, especially in *World Fire* (1995).²⁹

Pyne provides an in-depth consideration of the cultural reception of fire in *Fire: Nature and Culture* (2012).³⁰ Here, he evaluates the relationship between fire and human communities in terms of social and historical attitudes, practices, and belief systems. The author's detailed and articulate analysis speaks well of the breadth of his research. He does not always interrogate his sources, however, leading to firm conclusions based on limited information. Suppositions around the significance of the pre-Christian summer fire celebrations of northern Europe are presented as historically verifiable, despite the lack of recorded history available from this period.³¹ Pyne relies on Frazer's interpretation of 'need-fires' without

²⁸ Compare Bachelard's work with modern psychological studies, such as David Canter, ed., *Fires and Human Behaviour* (London/New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1980).

²⁹ Stephen J. Pyne, *World Fire: The Culture of Fire on Earth* (New York: Henry Holt, 1995).

³⁰ Pyne, *Nature and Culture*.

³¹ Simon Young, "Celtic Myths: Celtic History?" *History Today* 52, no. 4 (2002): 18, accessed February 26 2018, <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=6427706&site=eds-live>.

engaging with the limitations of Frazer's methods or seeking corroboration from modern scholarship.³²

Further to the versatility of fire within different cultural settings, Pyne might have explored how and why traditional fire rites and folklore have been modified over time. Although he notes the integration of pre-Christian agrarian festivals into the Christian liturgical calendar, he does not assess the practical and theological implications of adapting fire rites for Christian worship.³³ This is a missed opportunity to explore the nuances of fire imagery which would have been pertinent to Pyne's area of interest.

Several of Pyne's environmental concerns are echoed by Einar Jensen in *Ancient Fire, Modern Fire* (2016).³⁴ The book was written as a resource for educators and community members concerned about fire safety, especially those in wildfire zones.³⁵ The author calls for greater understanding and respect for the destructive power of fire. Jensen's emphasis on the dangers of fire to human and natural environments echoes the prevailing concerns of contemporary western society.³⁶ His is a cautionary work which considers fire as a physical phenomenon, rather than its role in the imagination.

Jensen guides the reader through several aspects of the relationship between human beings and fire. Each chapter includes a selection of excerpts from fire-related sources. Newspaper reports and firefighting guidelines are incorporated alongside myths and sacred texts. The book is not concerned with textual analysis but with demonstrating how fire has been used and misused by human beings.³⁷ Religious and cultural narratives are pressed into the service of illustrating points about fire safety and are rarely considered within their own context. For example, Jensen describes a fire myth from the Alabama people, an indigenous population group of southeastern North America. Rather than situating the myth within its

³² Pyne, *Nature and Culture*, 147-148.

³³ *Ibid.*, 150.

³⁴ Einar Jensen, *Ancient Fire, Modern Fire: Understanding and Living With Our Friend and Foe* (Masonville: PixyJack Press, 2016).

³⁵ Jensen, *Ancient Fire*, vii-ix; back cover.

³⁶ For the primacy of fire safety in British society, see Chapter 3.

³⁷ Jensen, *Ancient Fire*, viii-ix.

cultural milieu, he simply offers it as a teaching point: ‘In other words, when you’re cooking, stay in the kitchen, and don’t abandon campfires until the fire is out completely.’³⁸

Jensen argues that such traditional cultural narratives are relevant and useful for educating contemporary audiences. This point is sound, and well illustrated by his examples. However, by appropriating cultural narratives as pre-packaged lessons for the modern reader, Jensen forestalls further critical and imaginative engagement with the narratives themselves. The reader is not given opportunity to explore the nuances of how the image of fire is presented, or consider how the reception of fire imagery may be informed by the wider cultural background or narrative tradition. When discussing biblical texts and religious practices, Jensen fails to utilise perspectives from relevant academic disciplines. His lack of critical engagement leads him to draw conclusions about the significance of fire in Christianity and Judaism without sufficient scholarly support.³⁹ Since Jensen makes limited use of secondary sources to support his interpretations, it is difficult for the reader to assess the validity of Jensen’s ideas about fire in cultural and religious traditions.

Hazel Rossotti devotes more time to the imagistic and symbolic qualities of fire in her work *Fire: Servant, Source and Enigma* (1993).⁴⁰ Rossotti writes from a British context as a senior research fellow at Oxford University, where she specialises in inorganic chemistry.⁴¹ Her detailed examples of fire in technology and human society span diverse cultures and traditions. This volume is similar in scope to the works of Pyne and Jensen, since Rossotti is interested in providing an overview of fire as it relates to human culture. However, Rossotti’s approach is less environmental and more anthropological in focus. Among many other categories, she addresses fire as a religious image, although Christianity is mentioned only briefly in relation to the ritual use of candles. Of the Orthodox and Catholic use of candle-lit processions at Easter, Rosotti remarks: ‘...sometimes the symbolism seems restricted to the

³⁸ Jensen, *Ancient Fire*, 87.

³⁹ Ibid., 102. Note the lack of external references used by Jensen in this section.

⁴⁰ Hazel Rossotti, *Fire: Servant, Scourge, and Enigma* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 1993; New York: Dover Publications, 2002). Citations refer to the Dover Publications edition.

⁴¹ Rossotti, *Fire*, vi.

light of the flame.’⁴² She neglects to explore other uses or interpretations of fire in Christian contexts, instead focusing on fire rituals in other traditions. Since she does not engage with the liturgies which frame the Easter processions, Rossotti overlooks any nuance which might be added to this interpretation. As we will discover later in the thesis, light is a dominant theme in the Anglo-Catholic Easter Vigil; but the kindling of a ‘new fire’ as the source of that light evokes further imaginative engagement with the presence and saving action of God.⁴³

The subject of fire and culture is taken up by Alan Krell in *Burning Issues: Fire in Art and the Social Imagination* (2011).⁴⁴ Krell understands fire to have a ‘Janus-like character’ which is seen in the antithetical features of fire as destructive and creative, violent and sustaining.⁴⁵ His book explores fire as an image of destruction, revelation, celebration, creative activity, and social space, amongst other ideas. This full-colour illustrated volume draws on artistic and literary sources in order to explore its themes. Mythological and religious aspects of the image of fire are approached through selected works, including journalistic sources and historical autobiography, as well as the arts.

In regards to fire in biblical imagery and its reception in western culture, the author highlights the narratives of the burning bush (Exodus 3) and the blazing furnace traversed by Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego (Daniel 3). He suggests that in biblical literature, ‘fire is all about the shocking and the revelatory.’⁴⁶ In this section, Krell focuses on artistic reception in prayer book illuminations, iconography, and painting.⁴⁷ He traces connections between these artistic works and themes from classical myth, demonstrating the interdependence of various literary and mythological traditions in the reception of the image of fire.⁴⁸ Elsewhere, Krell notes the ‘redemptive’ aspects of fire when it is associated with Christ and Pentecost, but this is extrapolated from a single work of art (the cast iron

⁴² Rossotti, *Fire*, 248.

⁴³ These themes are explored in Chapter 6.

⁴⁴ Alan Krell, *Burning Issues: Fire and Art in the Social Imagination* (London: Reaktion Books, 2011).

⁴⁵ Krell, *Burning Issues*, 7.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 76.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 76-82.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 81.

sculpture ‘Hanging Fire’ by Cornelia Parker, 1998).⁴⁹ Krell overlooks possible connections with redemption in other biblical narratives, even when discussing the rescue of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego from the fiery furnace. The theme of redemption is subsequently applied to the rebuilding of London following the 1666 conflagration, but other possible theological connections are not explored.⁵⁰

Krell’s work conceptualises fire as inherently ‘contradictory and paradoxical.’⁵¹ As a result, ambiguities in the image of fire are routinely polarised to form binary oppositions, and the book fails to examine the full conceptual and emotional range of the image of fire. This is especially the case when the author seeks to understand fire in theological terms. Krell acknowledges the complexity of the image of fire within theological frameworks but presents it as ‘contradictory symbolism.’⁵² He explains that in mythology and religion, ‘[f]ire may illuminate [...] yet may also be understood as an element of dread and damnation.’⁵³ While he acknowledges that these contrasting ideas might coincide through juxtaposition and paradox, Krell misses the opportunity to explore the interconnectedness of suffering, redemption, destruction, and (re)creation as they appear within his examples.⁵⁴

The image of fire is the chosen subject for discourse analysis in *Fire Metaphors: Discourses of Awe and Authority* by Jonathan Charteris-Black (2017).⁵⁵ Charteris-Black takes a cognitive linguistic approach to fire imagery, considering how fire imagery is used to express power and authority in contemporary British social and political discourse. He notes the complexity around human experiences of fire, and discusses the multivalence of fire in language and in life.⁵⁶ However, this same multivalence is downplayed as a result of his chosen linguistic

⁴⁹ Krell, *Burning Issues*, 13-14.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid., 7.

⁵² Ibid., 71.

⁵³ Ibid., 15.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 65.

⁵⁵ Jonathan Charteris-Black, *Fire Metaphors: Discourses of Awe and Authority* (London/New York: Bloomsbury, 2017).

⁵⁶ Charteris-Black, *Fire Metaphors*, 6-10; 32-33.

method, which he uses to dissect and classify fire-related metaphors and discourse. Linguistic clarity is attained at the cost of the creative and cognitive ambiguity which is inherent in the image of fire. Even so, the author's attentiveness to language and cognition facilitates useful insights into the relationship between fire, the body, and emotion, as conceptualised in contemporary British discourse.⁵⁷

Charteris-Black acknowledges the role of fire imagery in religious discourse, but approaches sacred texts and religious practices without theological acumen. His chapter on fire imagery in the Hebrew Bible undertakes linguistic analysis without the appropriate understanding of biblical literature or the nuances of translation. In a bid to interpret the significance of the phrase 'profane fire' in Leviticus 10:1-2, the author builds his case solely based on the *Latin* etymology of an *English* translation. This methodology is inappropriate for handling texts which were composed in ancient Hebrew. Biblical scholars translate the phrase in question as 'strange fire' rather than 'profane fire,' and Latin etymology has little to do with the interpretation of a Hebrew text.⁵⁸ Charteris-Black thus draws conclusions based on unsuitable evidence.⁵⁹ All too often, entire arguments rest on exceptional cases of fire in the Hebrew Bible such as the (aborted) sacrifice of Isaac, in which God calls Abraham to offer his son as a burnt offering only to stay Abraham's hand and provide a ram instead (Genesis 22:1-19). Despite acknowledging the uniqueness of this narrative, Charteris-Black claims the offering of Isaac can be taken as normative of Israelite sacrificial procedure.⁶⁰ In the same discussion, a passage from Exodus is erroneously attributed to Ezekiel: a less critical issue than flawed methodology, but further indicative of the author's unfamiliarity with the texts.⁶¹ Similar problems are found in the discussion of Easter fire traditions in

⁵⁷ Charteris-Black, *Fire Metaphors*, 35-62.

⁵⁸ Richard S. Hess, "Leviticus 10:1: Strange Fire and an Odd Name," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 12, no. 2 (2002): 187, accessed 26 March 2018, https://www.ibr-bbr.org/files/bbr/BBR_2002b_02_Hess_Lev10StrangeFire.pdf.

⁵⁹ Charteris-Black, *Fire Metaphors*, 68.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 72.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

Christianity, which Charteris-Black fails to consider in reference to liturgical resources which would help to put the rituals into context.⁶²

The above sources offer useful information about fire in history, culture, and society which will prove valuable to the interests of this project. On the whole, these authors embrace the multifaceted nature of fire insofar as they can be identified in separate uses or conceptions of fire. The multivalent dimensions of fire imagery tend to be overlooked, however, or else reduced to unresolvable binary paradoxes. These sources address the image of fire from within their disciplines of anthropology, psychology, environmental science, and cultural studies; they do not claim to undertake the work of theology. Where they do choose to incorporate theological ideas, they are rarely conversant with the texts and practices they describe. This is evident in frequent omissions and errors of interpretation, especially in textual analysis. The tools of academic theology are needed if we wish to contextualise the image of fire for contemporary experience and Christian practice.

As a component of biblical imagery, the image of fire has long been used to express theological ideas within the Christian tradition.⁶³ However, there are few examples of theological reflection on the implications of fire itself. The work of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin exemplifies the division between a theology *which uses* the image of fire and a theology *of* fire. Teilhard, a French Jesuit priest, scientist, and theologian, produced a number of influential works during the first half of the 20th century.⁶⁴ In his books and correspondence, Teilhard uses the image of fire to express the dynamic, energising, and unifying creative force of Christ in the cosmos.⁶⁵ In his *Mass on the World* (1923), Teilhard characterises fire as ‘the source of being’ using heavy allusion to Genesis 1 and the opening of the Gospel of John: ‘In the beginning there were not coldness and darkness: there was the *Fire* [original

⁶² Charteris-Black, *Fire Metaphors*, 69-70.

⁶³ Hastings, “Fire,” 242. For the reception history of fire in the Bible, see: Dale C. Allison, Jr. et al., eds., *Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Reception*, Vol. 9 (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2014), s.v. “fire,” accessed 11 September 2017, <https://doi.org/10.1515/ebr.fire>.

⁶⁴ David Grumett, *Teilhard de Chardin: Theology, Humanity and Cosmos* (Leuven/Paris/Dudley, MA: Peeters, 2005), 1. For a list of Teilhard’s works, see: Grumett, *Teilhard*, 277-281.

⁶⁵ See, especially, Teilhard’s autobiographical work: Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Heart of the Matter*, trans. René Hague, ed. R. P. Pryne (1950; reprint, Toronto: The Great Library Collection, 2015, Kindle edition).

emphasis].⁶⁶ He presents the ‘fire’ of love and divine grace as purifying, consuming, creative, and transformational.⁶⁷ It is a fire which dissolves the barriers between God and the world.⁶⁸ His use of fire imagery is not systematic but suggestive, drawing on the imaginative depth of the image of fire to suggest theological connections and ideas without defining them explicitly.⁶⁹

Although theologians such as Teilhard have developed fire as a theological metaphor, the subject of fire is not always considered substantive enough to be covered by theological dictionaries. *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* has no entry for fire, but re-directs the reader to the ‘pillar of fire and cloud,’ which represents a single instance of fire imagery found in Exodus 13:21-22.⁷⁰ Meanwhile, *The New SCM Dictionary of Christian Spirituality* does not consider fire a relevant category for inclusion.⁷¹ Capturing a general lack of enthusiasm towards fire in Christian practice, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* contains an entry for ‘fish’ but not ‘fire.’⁷² Like these others, *The New SCM Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship* contains no entry for fire — although certain entries do recognise the role of fire in the Anglo-Catholic Easter Vigil service.⁷³

Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible explains the biblical applications of fire in terms of fire’s ancient practical uses (cooking, heating, warfare) and its role in divine judgement and sacrificial offerings. It considers fire ‘the primary medium’ for divine self-revelation and

⁶⁶ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Hymn of the Universe*, trans. Simon Bartholomew (London: Collins, 1965), 21.

⁶⁷ Henri De Lubac, *The Religion of Teilhard de Chardin*, trans. René Hague (London: Collins, 1967), 128-129.

⁶⁸ Teilhard, *Hymn*, 34.

⁶⁹ In particular, see the poetic use of fire metaphors in Teilhard, *Hymn*, 59-71; Teilhard, *Heart*, part 1.

⁷⁰ David Noel Freedman, ed., *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 2 (New York: Doubleday, 1992), s.v. “fire, pillar of.”

⁷¹ Philip Sheldrake, ed., *The New SCM Dictionary of Christian Spirituality* (London: SCM Press, 2005; repr. 2013).

⁷² E. A. Livingstone, ed., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

⁷³ Paul Bradshaw, ed., *The New SCM Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship* (London: SCM Press, 2002), s.v. “Easter vigil”; “new fire.”

provides a list of such occasions in the biblical texts.⁷⁴ The style of entry is primarily concerned with directing the reader to different uses of fire in the Hebrew Bible rather than offering any particular analysis. It includes references to only two New Testament verses, both in the book of Revelation. These are Revelation 1:14 and 2:18, which use fire imagery to describe the ‘Son of Man’ and ‘Son of God,’ respectively. The *Eerdmans* entry contains no reference to the image of fire in the sayings of Jesus, or the paradigm-shifting experience of divine fire at Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4). It therefore overlooks some significant theological connections, especially in the association between fire and the Holy Spirit. I will explore some of these connections in Chapter 2.

A fuller treatment of the image of fire is provided by *The Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*.⁷⁵ The approach is broadly similar to *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, though with more detail. Both begin with the everyday, practical uses of fire before moving on to the categories of sacrifice, divine judgement, and theophany. The distinction between everyday uses of fire and more explicitly theological categories could lead the reader to infer that there is little connection between the two. My research will show that this is not the case.⁷⁶ In other ways, however, *The Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* undertakes reasonably comprehensive consideration of fire in biblical texts, and explores how fire imagery is used to convey ideas about ritual purification, divine presence, and eschatology. The entry concludes with a brief survey of fire metaphors in the Bible.

De Gruyter’s *The Encyclopaedia of the Bible and Its Reception* provides an extensive entry on fire, divided into a number of subsections covering fire and fire imagery in the Ancient Near East, Hebrew Bible, New Testament, Abrahamic religions, and various art forms.⁷⁷ Each subsection is written by a different contributor (or contributors) with expertise in the

⁷⁴ Michael M. Homan, “Fire,” in *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. David Noel Freedman et al. (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans, 2000), 461.

⁷⁵ Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit and Tremper Longman III, eds., *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downers Grove/Nottingham: IVP, 1998), s.v. “fire.”

⁷⁶ In particular, see Chapters 2 and 3.

⁷⁷ Allison, et al., *Encyclopedia*, s.v. “fire.”

relevant field. All but one of these subsections identify a duality in the nature of fire.⁷⁸ De Gruyter's *Encyclopaedia* demonstrates a trend in contemporary biblical reception to understand characteristics of fire according to binary categories. Contributors repeatedly distinguish between 'positive' and 'negative' aspects of fire and fire imagery. These loaded terms encourage the reader to make certain value judgements in their attitudes towards fire in a religious context. My research into the multivalence of the image of fire will challenge this trend and suggest a more integrated framework in place of binary categories.

In biblical studies, fire and fire imagery tend to be addressed as constituents of broader subject areas. Investigations into the material culture of the Bible consider the various uses of fire in ancient Israel and first-century Palestine to determine its role in the home and society. These sources may use archaeological evidence to establish the historical background for fire-related technology mentioned in a biblical passage.⁷⁹ Imagery is generally treated as a separate matter pertaining to theological language — usually in the form of metaphor and simile, as in Caird's work, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible*.⁸⁰ Linguistic and textual analyses of biblical passages assess fire as metaphor or motif, since wider applications of the image usually lie outside their purview. Works such as Soskice's *Metaphor and Religious Language* expound the relationship between language and religious conceptual frameworks, but treat imagery as a specific category rather than focusing on individual images.⁸¹

Studies on the Israelite sacrificial system integrate the physical operations of fire (to burn and consume) with its ritual significance, and sometimes include analysis of the imagery as a result. The volume *Ritual and Metaphor: Sacrifice in the Bible*, edited by Christian A. Eberhart, is one pertinent example.⁸² Eberhart's chapter on cultic terminology in the Hebrew Bible attaches significance to the directionality of flames and smoke, suggesting that the imagery

⁷⁸ The exception is the second subsection, entitled, "Hebrew Bible/Old Testament," by contributor Kristin Helms.

⁷⁹ Notable examples include: Oded Borowski, *Daily Life in Biblical Times* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003); B. S. J. Isserlin, *The Israelites* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001).

⁸⁰ G. B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997).

⁸¹ Janet Martin Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985).

⁸² Christian A. Eberhart, ed., *Ritual and Metaphor: Sacrifice in the Bible* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011), accessed 4 April 2015, <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/heb.31351.0001.001>.

of upward movement relates to how the sacrificial rite is to be understood.⁸³ An awareness of how the physical reality of fire informs biblical fire imagery will assist our understanding of the theological potential of the image of fire, especially in Chapters 2 and 6 of the thesis.

There is little in the way of scholarly engagement with the image of fire as it relates to Christian practice specifically, as the above theological dictionaries have indicated. Light symbolism is often emphasised over and above other readings of fire imagery. The Alcuin Liturgy guide to symbols in Christian worship addresses certain liturgical practices that use fire, but reduces fire imagery to little more than the originator of light.⁸⁴ The image of fire is given more attention within sources which advocate an innovative, multi-sensory approach to Christian worship. As an example, fire is featured in several new Christian liturgies offered by the book *Making Liturgy: Creating Rituals for Worship and Life*.⁸⁵ Even here, engagement with the image of fire remains limited. The lighting of a fire or candle is used as a symbolic gesture which is left uninterpreted within the sample liturgical texts.⁸⁶ Like other liturgical resources, the book offers little reflection on the theological significance of the image and presence of fire.

Olive M. Fleming Drane suggests integrating some simple fire practices into one's personal spiritual life in her resource *Spirituality to Go: Rituals and Reflections for Everyday Living*.⁸⁷ Her examples involve burning symbols of past phases of life as a way to process change.⁸⁸ Christine Valters Paintner offers an extended meditation on the relevance of the four classic elements (water, wind, earth, and fire) as a metaphor for aspects of the Christian

⁸³ Christian A. Eberhart, "Sacrifice? Holy Smokes! Reflections on Cult Terminology for Understanding Sacrifice in the Hebrew Bible," in *Ritual and Metaphor: Sacrifice in the Bible*, ed. Christian A. Eberhart (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011), 28, accessed 4 April 2015, <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/heb.31351.0001.001>.

⁸⁴ Christopher Irvine, ed., *The Use of Symbols in Worship*, Alcuin Liturgy Guides 4 (London: SPCK, 2007), 58; 63; 69-71.

⁸⁵ Dorothea McEwan et al., *Making Liturgy: Creating Rituals for Worship and Life* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2001).

⁸⁶ See, for example, McEwan et al., *Making Liturgy*, 96; 110.

⁸⁷ Olive M. Fleming Drane, *Spirituality on the Go: Rituals and Reflections for Everyday Living* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2006).

⁸⁸ Drane, *Spirituality*, 37; 53.

devotional life, and includes ‘response’ sections which draw on the image of fire.⁸⁹ Such sources provide ideas and examples of the image of fire in Christian practice rather than critical reflection on the significance of fire imagery for Christian worship. The contributions of these books will be considered in more depth in Chapter 6.

Both theological and non-theological approaches offer valuable tools for considering the image of fire as it relates to Christian practice. Existing non-theological approaches consider a range of social, aesthetic, and environmental implications of fire and fire imagery. They are therefore able to situate the image of fire within its social context to varying degrees. However, authors tend to lack familiarity with sacred texts and the exegetical methods with which to analyse them. As such, they are not equipped to be sensitive to nuanced theological questions and connections, and ultimately fail to illuminate fire as a religious image.

It might seem as though academic theology and biblical studies should provide the solution to this problem. After all, theological approaches possess the appropriate tools to deal with relevant religious texts and practices. Yet consideration of this topic has been severely neglected in 20th and 21st century theology. The image of fire has been made a subsidiary of other subjects, studied as part of the imagery of theophany, sacrifice, divine judgement, and apocalypse. Fire is therefore understood as an evocative biblical motif with limited applications for Christian practice.

Fire’s complex role in human experience presents a number of implications for a Christian hermeneutic of the image of fire. Although the Bible represents an important primary source for this research, ascertaining ‘the biblical image of fire’ is not the ultimate goal. Instead, biblical exegesis will provide the springboard for our theological observations, introducing the multivalence of fire and establishing the legitimacy of the image in Christian thought and practice. The discussion will be grounded in the experiential dimensions of the image, going beyond textual analysis to consider the relationship between the lived experience of fire and the image of fire as it exists in the imagination. These two strands will be combined to facilitate the consideration of selected secular and Christian fire rituals, and to reveal ways in which the image of fire resonates with Christian theology and praxis.

⁸⁹ Christine Valters Paintner, *Water, Wind, Earth and Fire: The Christian Practice of Praying with the Elements* (Notre Dame, IN: Sorin Books, 2010).

As many of the above sources reflect, the image of fire is not fixed but dependent upon social and ritual contexts. Relying only on the biblical texts to instruct us about the theological dimensions of fire would be to ignore the contextual issues which inform the contemporary imagination. To properly address these factors, I will utilise a multidisciplinary method which combines theological analysis with the perspectives of social anthropology and ritual studies.⁹⁰ The anthropological and cultural studies of Pyne, Rossotti, Krell and others will inform my consideration of fire in contemporary British society. Ritual studies will provide the critical tools for original analysis of selected fire practices, following the approach of first-hand observation demonstrated by anthropologists such as Sonda Hausner.⁹¹ My analysis will take the insights of these authors forward, engaging with the theological implications of contemporary fire practices, rituals, and imagery. This integrative approach will provide scope to consider the image of fire in a range of contexts and observe its significance in day-to-day life, biblical imagery, and contemporary ritual experiences.

2. Conceptualising the image of fire

Despite the lack of theological engagement with the image of fire in contemporary scholarship (revealed above), the study of imagery is recognised as having a valuable and necessary place in theology and biblical studies.⁹² As a feature of the biblical texts, imagery has long been a component of Christian religious expression, and the application and reception of imagery is in evidence throughout church history in Christian art, symbolism, and ritual. As a result, imagery is not incidental to the work of theology. Rather, ‘genuine appreciation of imagery is crucial’ for any degree of biblical and theological literacy.⁹³ One of the aims of this thesis is to revive an appreciation for the image of fire within the Christian imagination by illustrating its broad theological potential. As imagery represents a significant

⁹⁰ My methodology is detailed in the sections below.

⁹¹ Further explanation of Hausner’s work, and the rationale underpinning my use of ritual criticism, are elaborated later in this introduction.

⁹² Michael L. Humphries, “Imagery,” in *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. David Noel Freedman et al. (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans, 2000), 633.

⁹³ David V. Urban, “Imagery,” in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer et al. (London: SPCK/Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 319.

category for both theology in general and the present research in particular, we must take care to develop a suitable understanding of the image of fire for the discussion which lies ahead. Doing so will necessitate a brief consideration of terminology in order to construct a working definition of the image of fire.

Imagery is an elusive term about which there is limited consensus. *The Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* defines an image as ‘a concrete thing... or action. Any object or action that we can picture is an image.’⁹⁴ The breadth of such a definition provides ample room for any conceivable expression of imagery. In practice, however, the usefulness of the definition is depreciated through its generality, since it would mean attributing the status of ‘image’ to virtually anything in the concrete world. On the other hand, defining imagery in general, or the image of fire in particular, based on a rigid checklist of criteria is equally problematic due to the nebulous nature of the subject. The reception of imagery is a matter of aesthetic judgement; it involves imaginative engagement with ‘intuitive ranges of meaning.’⁹⁵ It is a process which relies on subjective perception and response. Any useful definition must capture the sense of the term without being overly prescriptive about what may or may not be counted as imagery.

Theological approaches to imagery often rely on literary theory, which treats imagery as a linguistic (or cognitive linguistic) phenomenon related to theological and religious language.⁹⁶ From this perspective, imagery is a general term which covers all kinds of literary motifs and devices. While this thesis will devote a certain amount of attention to the image of fire in key biblical texts, it should not be supposed that the language of imagery refers only to literary images. Literary theory cannot be expected to account for imagery outwith literary texts. Not only that, but linguistic approaches typically define imagery solely as a vehicle for comparison by placing it in service of comparative devices such as metaphor and simile. In *The Language and Imagery of the Bible*, Caird describes imagery as ‘[t]he full stock of a book’s

⁹⁴ Ryken et al., *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, xiii.

⁹⁵ Gene Warren Doty, “The Bible Through a Poet’s Eyes,” in *The Complete Literary Guide to the Bible*, ed. Leland Ryken and Tremper Longman III (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 504.

⁹⁶ See, for instance, Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*.

non-literal language, and more particularly its comparative language...'⁹⁷ Following this definition, the 'image of fire' would refer only to occurrences of non-literal language which use fire as a point of comparison. Any component of the text which is *not* figurative would be ruled out by necessity, even if it relates to the depiction of fire.

Far from providing a litmus test to determine what qualifies as an image, these defining conditions only move the difficulty along a stage in the interpretive process. It is not always a simple matter to determine whether a portrayal of fire is to be taken figuratively or non-figuratively, especially in theological presentations of the image.⁹⁸ Therefore, it is desirable to avoid laborious or arbitrary decisions based on literal or non-literal properties. Taking comparison as a pre-condition for imagery likewise has its problems, because it risks reducing imagery to little more than its comparative function. It places the focus on identifying common traits between fire and the subject of the comparison, rather than exploring the range of literary and theological possibilities evoked by an imaginative portrayal of fire. Preoccupation with the presence of comparison distracts from, and even eclipses, other hermeneutic possibilities. As David Brown reminds us, ambiguity is not a drawback of the image; on the contrary, it provides scope for the multivalence and versatility of imagery by which to convey meaning.⁹⁹

The above approaches to biblical and theological imagery have focused on functions of language. The result is a restrictive model of imagery which fails to account for subjective aesthetic judgements by overemphasising one or two formal linguistic traits. In addition, to be applicable for a discussion dealing with ritual and religious practice, our understanding must account for images beyond their expression in language. Below, I will propose a new working definition for the image of fire. My approach will distinguish between the 'image of fire' and 'fire imagery,' using this distinction to disentangle the relationship between the image of fire, representations of fire, and fire as a physical phenomenon.

⁹⁷ Caird, *Language and Imagery*, 149.

⁹⁸ David H. Aaron, *Biblical Ambiguities: Metaphor, Semantics and Divine Imagery* (Boston: Brill, 2003), 1-2; 23.

⁹⁹ David Brown, *God and Mystery in Words: Experience through Metaphor and Drama* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 50.

Source, image, and representations of fire

A solely linguistic approach is insufficient because it cannot account for non-linguistic forms of the image of fire. For a definition of the image of fire which functions beyond the realm of language, our first consideration will not be *uses* of the image of fire but its referent: the physical phenomenon of fire itself. In cognitive linguistics, the ‘source domain’ denotes the real-world experience or concrete reality of the image in question.¹⁰⁰ The physical phenomenon of fire thus forms the ‘source’ for the image of fire. Likewise, anthropologist Clifford Geertz outlines how cultural processes, including the interpretation of images, rely on ‘extrinsic’ factors which exist beyond the individual imagination.¹⁰¹ These perspectives remind us that images are drawn from concrete referents which people encounter as external perceptual realities.

Like all images, the image of fire is contingent upon its source; therefore, to overlook the source is to overlook the basis of the image. The relationship between the physical phenomenon of fire and fire imagery is primarily one of representation. Viewing a photograph of fire is not the same as viewing fire directly, because the external reality of fire is mediated through the image which represents it. Likewise, a drawing or literary description of fire conveys the concept of ‘fire’ to the audience. Such representations of fire, which are extrinsic to the receiver, will here be referred to as fire imagery.

In this understanding, fire imagery is not solely the purview of artistic works such as literature or photography. Fire imagery is found in many areas of modern life, including product marketing, safety signage, and news footage of human conflict and natural disasters. Portrayals of fire can be found in a range of media, whether it be through linguistic, visual, aural, or other mode of representation. It follows that fire imagery can be extra-linguistic — that is, unarticulated by language.

Neither should it be assumed that fire imagery is strictly pictorial, visual, or textual. In a recent musical composition entitled *Exodus III*, composer Kerensa Briggs incorporated an auditory representation of fire by evoking the rhythmic rise and fall of flames through

¹⁰⁰ Zoltán Kövecses, *Language, Mind, and Culture: A Practical Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 120.

¹⁰¹ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 92, accessed 15 September 2018, <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/fulcrum.9g54xh780>.

music.¹⁰² In doing so, she used non-visual cues to portray the ‘burning bush’ in which God’s presence was revealed to Moses. The piece was one of six choral compositions produced as part of the TheoArtistry Composers’ Scheme, a collaborative project which brought together composers and theologians to work at the intersection of theology and the arts.¹⁰³

My involvement as theological collaborator for *Exodus III* informed certain avenues of thought in the development of my doctoral research.¹⁰⁴ Working with a composer on the creation of a non-visual portrayal of the burning bush brought the sensory dimensions of the image to the fore.¹⁰⁵ It demonstrated that fire imagery may appeal to a range of sensory and cognitive faculties in its representation of fire. I was able to apply these findings in a second collaborative project with Scottish poet Christine de Luca, who sought to capture the multi-sensory and multivalent dimensions of Moses’ experience at the burning bush in her poem *Nec Tamen Consumeatur*.¹⁰⁶ De Luca composed the poem in Shetlandic dialect. The lively onomatopoeic character of this dialect emphasises the sound and movement of the fire it describes. Like visual imagery, non-visual portrayals call the reality of fire to mind.¹⁰⁷ The reality of fire is not only physical, but cultural.¹⁰⁸ Although fire imagery is rooted in the physical phenomenon of fire, it also has potential to suggest a variety of meanings and associations. Hence, fire imagery draws on the existence of fire as a social, emotional, and metaphysical reality.

¹⁰² Kerensa Briggs, “Exodus III,” in *Annunciations: New Music for the 21st Century*, ed. George Corbett (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, forthcoming).

¹⁰³ See “TheoArtistry Composers’ Scheme,” TheoArtistry, accessed 27 October 2017, <http://theoartistry.org/projects/composers-scheme>.

¹⁰⁴ For further reflections on this project, see: Rebekah Dyer, “Setting Fire to Music: The Burning Bush of *Exodus III*,” in *Annunciations: New Music for the 21st Century*, ed. George Corbett (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, forthcoming).

¹⁰⁵ The film documentary for the scheme captures the collaborative process, including my work with the sensory dimensions of fire. See David Boos, “TheoArtistry: Theologians and Composers in Creative Collaboration,” University of St Andrews, video, 20:53, 26 January 2018, <https://youtu.be/U2NoajHcp2E>.

¹⁰⁶ Christine de Luca, “Nec Tamen Consumeatur” (unpublished, 2018).

¹⁰⁷ Humphries, “Imagery,” 632.

¹⁰⁸ Bachelard, *Psychoanalysis*, 10.

Towards a working definition of 'the image of fire'

Clifford Geertz discusses the semantic value of symbols as 'concrete embodiments of ideas...' ¹⁰⁹ In a similar manner, images are encoded with, and communicate, meaning. Fire is not a neutral concept in contemporary British culture, as the following chapters will illustrate in depth. Fire is dangerous; its presence is associated with risk. Various other ideas and associations are attached to the presence of fire depending on context: a gentle hearth fire may be considered cosy or romantic, but an unstoppable wildfire might be described as a natural disaster. By evoking the concept of fire in the imagination, fire imagery arouses feelings and associations connected with one's (often contrasting) perceptions of fire. These associations may be used as points of comparison to explain another concept: for example, associations with heat and danger may result in fire imagery being used to communicate the experience of intense emotions. ¹¹⁰

Comparison was an important feature in the above discussions regarding literary imagery. However, as our understanding of the image of fire takes shape, we are able to affirm that fire imagery may *incorporate* comparison but is not defined by it. Let us take the example of a warning sign depicting a flame crossed through with a large red 'X.' The sign bears a representation of fire (i.e., fire imagery) to communicate the prohibition of fire in the area. However, the imagery on the sign is not comparative. The sign will not normally be understood as using fire imagery to represent something other than fire. By shifting focus from comparison to representation, we are able to incorporate instances of fire imagery even when comparison is absent.

While fire imagery is an extrinsic representation of fire, it may prompt the receiver to imagine aspects of what is represented. In doing so, they construct an internal mental image (or 'mental picture') of fire. ¹¹¹ This mental image is not exclusively pictorial, but may include other sensory information as the receiver is reminded of the heat, sound, and smells they

¹⁰⁹ Geertz, *Interpretation*, 91.

¹¹⁰ Charteris-Black, *Fire Metaphors*, 35; 52.

¹¹¹ Humphries, "Imagery," 632.

associate with being near a fire.¹¹² The embodied nature of human perception means that to imagine something is not merely to picture it, but to construct or reproduce an experience.¹¹³ It may involve an emotional response (for example, nostalgia, excitement, or fear); and judgements about the nature of the fire (e.g. destructive or comforting) based on contextual cues. Fire and fire imagery are *encountered* as an affective experience rather than simply *decoded* for their semiotic value. I will use the language of *encounter* throughout the thesis to capture this dimension of the image of fire. The physical experience of fire is not solely (or even primarily) characterised by what is *seen*, but also by what is *felt*.¹¹⁴ Further, the social nature of human cognition means that these experiences are understood within shared communal frameworks.¹¹⁵ As Geertz indicates, the construction of meaning occurs according to cultural modes of interpretation, which are held in common between members of a society.¹¹⁶ The reception of fire and fire imagery is thus informed not only by individual experience, but by social and cultural attitudes towards fire.

Thus, the ‘image of fire’ here refers to the internal and communal imaginative construct of fire: what fire can signify, suggest, or symbolise; the meanings which have been attached to the concept of fire by cultural association or personal experience. It is not a single conception of fire. It is an amalgam of different experiences, associations, and expectations arising from the physical and cultural significance of fire. It is a conceptual matrix which forms and informs how fire (and fire imagery) is understood, portrayed, and interpreted in any given context. My definition bears some similarities to Kaufman’s terminology on the construction of God in the human mind, which he calls the ‘image/concept of God.’¹¹⁷ The image of fire is not fixed, but continually (re)constructed within the imagination.

¹¹² Natika Newton, “Experience and Imagery,” *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 20 (1982): 477, accessed 14 August 2017, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.2041-6962.1982.tb00314.x>.

¹¹³ Newton, “Experience,” 475.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 477.

¹¹⁵ Robert Prus, *Symbolic Interaction and Ethnographic Research: Intersubjectivity and the Study of Lived Human Experience* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1996), 11.

¹¹⁶ Geertz, *Interpretation*, 92.

¹¹⁷ Gordon D. Kaufman, *The Theological Imagination: Constructing the Concept of God* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1981), 14; 22.

The image of fire is expressed, or applied, through fire imagery. A fire metaphor, for example, is a single linguistic expression of the more numinous concept of fire which exists in the individual and social imagination. This means that fire imagery operates within a multivalent conceptual framework. Multivalence is not to be understood as a list of potential meanings from which one selects as if from a menu. It is the capacity of an image to evoke a whole range of ideas, associations, and emotions simultaneously and in relation to context. Therefore, the multivalence of fire and fire imagery means that it is not sufficient to merely characterise the image of fire in terms of a list of so-called ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ traits.

The insistence of modern scholars to assign a dual nature to fire, evidenced in the literature review above, might suggest that fire is defined by a fundamental paradox. Associations with judgement or warfare might thus be attributed to the destructiveness of fire, while associations with warmth, provision, or recreation could be said to correspond with fire’s creative capacity. Such a position relies on the assumption that creation and destruction are irreconcilable processes rather than expressions of the same chemical reaction. This concept will be explored further, and challenged, in the applications of fire examined throughout the thesis. Nonetheless, it is not the objective of this research to determine the fundamental nature of fire in phenomenological terms. I do not seek to stipulate a taxonomy of the image of fire, in which all possible readings are evidenced and accounted for. Our trajectory is quite different: to open up, rather than pin down, the manifold nature of the image of fire.

I argue that biblical texts and 21st century ritual experiences reflect a variegated conception of fire in which the many characteristics of fire are treated as overlapping and interdependent. As such, I will demonstrate that the human conceptualisation and experience of fire defy straightforward categorisation. Human beings encounter and interpret fire on multiple levels simultaneously, so that the image of fire carries various meanings, associations, and emotional responses. Throughout the project, I will uncover ways in which fire imagery is applied in different community settings and indicate ways the image of fire may be incorporated into contemporary Christian thought and practice. Establishing and exploring the multivalence of the image of fire will allow us to assess a range of applications, suggesting ways in which the image may operate in the social and theological imagination.

It should be noted that candles will not generally be included in the discussion despite their relevance to religious contexts. Unlike most forms of combustion, candles have an established liturgical and symbolic significance within Christian practice.¹¹⁸ Our task is to contextualise the image of fire where its theological significance has otherwise been overlooked. Therefore, while the candle flame is certainly deserving of scholarly attention, the use of candles fall outside our purview.¹¹⁹ The treatment of the candle flame as its own aesthetic category finds scholarly precedent in the work of Gaston Bachelard. As indicated in my literature review, Bachelard devoted an entire volume to the ‘flame of the candle’ as a unique form of the fire image.¹²⁰ He explains that ‘[t]he solitary flame has a character different from that of the fire in the hearth.’¹²¹ A hearth fire, he reminds us, requires tending; a candle burns on its own.¹²² Likewise, an individual candle flame produces a qualitatively different experience from, say, a brazier or bonfire.¹²³ My critical studies of fire rituals will examine the theological and sensory dimensions of fire on a larger scale, arguing that such encounters with fire can meaningfully contribute to Christian ritual experience.

The candle flame nonetheless shares in the multivalent character of the image of fire more broadly. As such, a brief overview of the liturgical use of candles will prove instructive at this stage. Liturgists stress the considerable variation to be found in the use of candles in Christian worship.¹²⁴ Though far from a universal component of Christian practice, candles have been used for both functional and symbolic purposes in church worship since at least the 4th century CE.¹²⁵ It is not uncommon to find candles used for prayer, sacrament, and

¹¹⁸ For an overview of the use of candles in Christian practice, see: A. J. MacGregor, “Candles, Lamps and Lights,” in *The New SCM Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship*, ed. Paul Bradshaw (London: SCM Press, 2002), 93-95.

¹¹⁹ More on the development of candles from a historical-liturgical perspective can be found in MacGregor, *Fire and Light*; Irvine, *Symbols*, 57-78.

¹²⁰ Bachelard, *Flame*, 1-2.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 24.

¹²² *Ibid.*

¹²³ Irvine, *Symbols*, 70.

¹²⁴ MacGregor, “Candles,” 93.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

vigils of remembrance.¹²⁶ Within the western Christian tradition, the use of candles is most strongly associated with both practical and symbolic illumination.¹²⁷ The glow of a candle flame has been integrated into the theological dichotomy of ‘dark vs. light,’ a key metaphoric framework by which the Christian narrative of sin and salvation is expressed.¹²⁸ A lit candle provides a tangible symbol of Christ as ‘Light of the World’ in some liturgies, while a Bible reading by candlelight may signify the spiritual illumination of Scripture.¹²⁹ A newly-baptised believer may be given a lit candle to celebrate their spiritual enlightenment by the Holy Spirit.¹³⁰ Such a candle, which is also frequently identified with the presence of Christ, serves as an image of hope and salvation. A lit candle may thus be used to convey the nature and presence of the divine.¹³¹

Some denominations have embraced the use of candles more than others. Historically, certain Protestant traditions (such as Calvinism) rejected the sacramental use of candles, while the Catholic church affords candles a significant role in its liturgy (not least in the rites of the Easter Vigil, which will be analysed in Chapter 6).¹³² The liturgical use of candles remained contentious in certain quarters of the Anglican tradition until the late 20th century.¹³³ Now, candles are present in many Anglican churches, especially on the altar or communion table, and as part of liturgical practice at Christmas and Easter.¹³⁴ The lack of literature referring to the liturgical use of candles in reformed traditions is indicative of candles’ lack of prominence outside Anglo-Catholic practice, though some denominations may employ candles in a secondary capacity.

¹²⁶ MacGregor, “Candles,” 94-95.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 93; Irvine, *Symbols*, 73-75.

¹²⁸ Sheldrake, *Christian Spirituality*, s.v. “light.” See also Barbara O’Dea, “Light,” in *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, ed. Michael Downey (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1993), 600-601.

¹²⁹ O’Dea, “Light,” 601; Irvine, *Symbols*, 62.

¹³⁰ Irvine, *Symbols*, 73-75.

¹³¹ Sheldrake, *Christian Spirituality*, s.v. “light.”

¹³² MacGregor, “Candles,” 95.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Irvine, *Symbols*, 63.

Despite these differences, liturgist Christopher Irvine claims that the Paschal candle, which represents the resurrected Christ, is so widespread that it ‘transcends church traditions.’¹³⁵ Likewise, the monastic community of Taizé — which is characterised by its candle-lit gatherings and contemplative mode of worship — has proven influential across denominational divides.¹³⁶ Alongside music and other creative arts, the Taizé model of Christian worship uses candles to create a ‘sensory experience’ which immerses participants in an atmosphere of prayer and contemplation.¹³⁷ The candle flames are also understood to convey ‘the mystery of Christ.’¹³⁸ The Taizé style of worship has been adopted to varying degrees by Christian communities around the world, including Britain.¹³⁹

Such theologically significant applications of the candle flame reveal the relevance of the image of fire for Christian practice. Moreover, they demonstrate the potential of fire imagery to serve multiple roles within Christian worship.¹⁴⁰ The variation we find in the liturgical use of candles stems not only from the multivalence of the candle flame but differences in denominational theologies. The same denominational issues which affect the reception of the candle flame also inform attitudes towards fire imagery more generally. The heterogeneity of the Christian religion means that each community exhibits its own theological, liturgical, and aesthetic preferences even within denominational affiliations. Hence, attitudes towards the image and presence of fire will vary between each individual faith community. With this in mind, my research will explore the potential contributions of

¹³⁵ Irvine, *Symbols*, 69.

¹³⁶ Taizé, “The Community Today,” last modified 8 March 2008, http://www.taize.fr/en_article6525.html.

¹³⁷ Brian Kirby, “Beauty from Silence: The Community of Taizé,” *ARTS* 28, no. 2 (2017): 45, accessed 26 September 2018, <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=sso&db=rh&AN=ATLAI FZK170710000763&site=eds-live&authtype=sso&custid=s3011414>.

¹³⁸ Taizé, “Christ is our hope, he is alive,” last modified 10 April 2015, http://www.taize.fr/en_article17828.html.

¹³⁹ Taizé, “News from Britain,” last modified 30 August 2018, http://www.taize.fr/en_article7684.html.

¹⁴⁰ MacGregor, “Candles,” 93.

the image of fire for Christian practice in the broadest sense, with the intention of providing insights that are applicable to a wide range of theological preferences and sensibilities.

Delineating Christian practice and the social imagination

The term ‘Christian practice’ covers innumerable facets of worship, community, and the life of faith across a multitude of cultures and traditions. This thesis does not presume to address all forms of Christian religious practice — an endeavour which would be as ineffectual as it would be vague — but to present considerations for incorporating the image of fire into British expressions of Christian community. For our purposes, ‘British’ is broadly defined as the geographical region of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. This geographical focus demarcates a necessary boundary on the scope of my research. Furthermore, a focus on contemporary British society will demonstrate the heterogeneity of fire-related attitudes and practices even within a relatively small geographical and cultural field. Like Christian practice, British society plays host to diverse perspectives and practices relating to fire and fire imagery.¹⁴¹

This project of contextualisation is concerned with the various factors which shape the construction, presentation, and reception of the image of fire for contemporary Christian practice. I will draw on some specific examples (especially in Chapter 6) in order to discuss the relationship between the image of fire and Christian practice in sufficient depth. As information about such practices is not always forthcoming, I have elected to focus on those which are accompanied by published liturgies (as in the case of Anglo-Catholic practices) and/or other accessible resources which detail the use of fire and fire imagery in Christian worship. Each of the chosen practices is centred around physical interaction with fire or fire imagery, usually within a group ritual or dedicated time of prayer. To fully appreciate the complexity of the image of fire in these examples, it is necessary to first understand fire’s multifaceted nature. As such, the thesis will examine — and build upon — the multivalent conceptualisation of fire within the social and theological imagination of communities in 21st century Britain.

¹⁴¹ As evidenced in Chapter 3.

I argued above that the human experience of fire takes place in reference to imaginative frameworks shared by members of a community. Throughout my research, I will refer to the image of fire as it is constructed within the ‘contemporary social imagination.’ When Krell describes ‘fires that enter the social imagination,’ he speaks of conflagrations which enter the collective memory of society.¹⁴² Major fires, such as the Great Fire of London in 1666, have persisted in the social consciousness for centuries after the event. He suggests that the enduring influence of such fires is precipitated through their representation in media and the arts.¹⁴³ Following this use of the term, the social imagination is taken to be roughly equivalent to the social consciousness as expressed through imaginative works.¹⁴⁴ The social imagination forms a shared frame of reference for conceptualising the image of fire in relation to other ideas within a society.¹⁴⁵

The concept of the social imagination aligns with Charles Taylor’s theory of the ‘social imaginary.’¹⁴⁶ There are, however, some important distinctions to be made between Taylor’s theory and our terminology. Taylor’s social imaginary operates on the macro scale, taking into account all of society’s structures and interpersonal dynamics.¹⁴⁷ It is the conceptual framework which constitutes the ‘common understanding’ that makes social interaction possible.¹⁴⁸ Taylor’s model echoes the view of anthropologist Clifford Geertz, who describes ‘that intersubjective world of common understandings into which all human individuals are born.’¹⁴⁹ In my chosen terminology, the social imagination is more akin to memory or awareness, a repository encapsulating all possible ideas and meanings associated with an

¹⁴² Krell, *Burning Issues*, 17.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ The *social imagination* is to be distinguished from the *sociological imagination*, which is a technical term applying to the field of sociology.

¹⁴⁵ For an anthropological perspective on the interconnectedness of culture, symbol, and context, see Geertz, *Interpretation*, 89-93; 169.

¹⁴⁶ Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham, NC/London: Duke University Press, 2004).

¹⁴⁷ Taylor, *Social Imaginaries*, 23.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Geertz, *Interpretation*, 92.

image in a particular society. The social imagination might be considered a subset of Taylor's social imaginary, but the two are not equivalent in function or scale.

I have opted for the terminology 'social imagination' because I am not referring to the wider 'imaginary' of society (i.e. its broader functions, structures, and interpersonal relations) but specifically the imaginative concepts of individuals in society — or, the social construction of images. The image of fire within the contemporary British social imagination is influenced by social attitudes towards personal and civic responsibility, wherein fire is considered a potential risk to health and safety. Factors which shape the image of fire in the contemporary British social imagination will be established in Chapter 3.

Any attempt to contextualise the image of fire for contemporary Christian practice would be incomplete without attention to the interplay between fire and gender. Although fire is a non-human entity — and therefore has no inherent gender — the image of fire is associated with certain gendered traits in British culture.¹⁵⁰ It is not necessary to take a gendered reading of fire imagery, as I will argue in my treatment of biblical fire imagery in Chapter 2. However, gendered interpretations should be noted when they arise. Chapter 3 will introduce ways in which fire is treated as a 'masculine image' embodying conventionally masculine traits. This association, subtle in some instances and made explicit in others, underlies the construction of fire imagery in cases where human gender expression is at stake in the social or ritual dynamic. Gendered conceptions of the image will appear as a recurring notion in each chapter of the thesis, revealing assumptions about the nature of fire as well as the expression of human gender. Chapter 6 will note the implications of a masculinised image of fire when it is applied to the concept of divine presence.

The social imagination informs Christian practice, since Christian believers are also members of society. It underpins certain assumptions and associations regarding fire, and determines what is considered 'common sense' knowledge about fire handling and fire safety. Yet for religious thought and practice the social imagination interacts with another shared frame of reference, which I will refer to as the 'theological imagination.' Within the theological imagination, the image of fire is constructed according to a broader set of conceptions about God, human nature, and the ordering of reality. I take a broader view than

¹⁵⁰ As evidenced in Chapter 3.

Kaufman in this regard, for whom the theological imagination is orientated entirely towards ‘the concept of God.’¹⁵¹ As a counterpart to the social imagination, the theological imagination helps form the significance of fire for religious practice.

In sum, the image of fire is diverse in its potential manifestations and meanings. This multivalence renders fire imagery ambiguous, since there is no single rubric for its interpretation. As in Turner’s concept of the ‘multivocality’ of symbols, the multivalence of images allows human beings (both individually and communally) to respond to the same image in multiple ways.¹⁵² Fire imagery is suggestive of numerous associations which are themselves ‘modes of signification.’¹⁵³ Therefore, interpreting fire imagery is not simply a matter of identifying what fire denotes in a given situation. Reception of the image of fire is subject to a complex hermeneutical process. Whether it is found in the biblical texts or in contemporary experience, the image of fire calls for careful exegesis. In the following section, I will explain my methodology for this task and provide a rationale for contextualising the image of fire through the study of ritual.

3. Approaching the image of fire through ritual criticism

My definition of the image of fire has indicated that cultural and social attitudes towards fire have a significant role in the formation and reception of fire imagery. Nevertheless, our enquiry extends beyond dominant trends in the social and theological imagination to consider specific acts of contextualisation in community rituals. My distinction between ‘ritual’ and ‘everyday’ experiences of fire correlates with Émile Durkheim’s famous division of the ‘sacred’ and the ‘profane.’¹⁵⁴ These terms do not imply a value judgement regarding what is *holy* and *unholy*, but refer to what falls within the frame of ritual practice and what

¹⁵¹ Kaufman, *Theological Imagination*, 12-14.

¹⁵² Victor W. Turner. “Symbolic Studies.” *Annual Review of Anthropology* (1975): 155. Accessed 30 September 2018. <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=sso&db=edsjsr&AN=edsjsr.2949353&site=eds-live&authtype=sso&custid=s3011414>.

¹⁵³ Turner, “Symbolic Studies,” 152.

¹⁵⁴ Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, trans. Joseph Ward Swain (London: Allen and Unwin, 1915; republished Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2008), 37.

belongs to ordinary, day-to-day life.¹⁵⁵ Through ritual, images and belief systems become ‘fused’ with the participants’ lived experiences.¹⁵⁶ Geertz argues that, by observing this fusion, ritual criticism provides insight into the beliefs and sensibilities that define a community.¹⁵⁷ Furthermore, ritual experiences have the potential to influence one’s understanding of everyday life.¹⁵⁸ Catherine Bell explains that Geertz’s theory points towards the reciprocal relationship between ritual and culture, in which ritual is ‘a veritable window on the most important processes of cultural life.’¹⁵⁹ Attention to how images are applied in ritual contexts thus provides a ‘special vantage point’ from which to analyse their significance within a given community setting.¹⁶⁰

For the purposes of this research, the term ‘community ritual’ refers to an event devised by, or on behalf of, a particular group for the purpose of performing communal identity. Certain Christian practices, such as rites of confession or the Eucharist, are to be considered expressions of community ritual since they constitute the rituals of a community of faith. Thus, the study of community fire rituals offers insight into the multivalence of the image of fire and its applicability for Christian ritual practice. This research contains in-depth case studies of three contemporary British fire rituals: namely, the Stonehaven Fireball Ceremony, in Aberdeenshire; the Beltane Fire Festival, in Edinburgh; and Up-Helly-Aa in Lerwick, Shetland. As fire rituals, they are characterised by their use of fire and fire imagery, which form the defining feature of the ritual performance. All three are major cultural events in Scotland, promoted by Scotland’s tourist board and attracting thousands of visitors each

¹⁵⁵ Victor W. Turner, “Frame, Flow and Reflection: Ritual and Drama as Public Liminality.” *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 6, no. 4 (December 1979): 468. Accessed 30 September 2018. <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=sso&db=rft&AN=ATLA0001457466&site=eds-live&authtype=sso&custid=s3011414>.

¹⁵⁶ Geertz, *Interpretation*, 112; Catherine Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 66.

¹⁵⁷ These elements of social structures and interaction are termed ‘worldview’ and ‘ethos’ (Geertz, *Interpretation*, 89).

¹⁵⁸ Geertz, *Interpretation*, 112.

¹⁵⁹ Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 28.

¹⁶⁰ Bell, *Ritual Theory*, 27.

year.¹⁶¹ These case studies are presented in Chapter 5. My research also contains careful analysis of other community rituals involving fire, including David Best's performance installation *Temple* and the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic ceremonies (Chapter 4); and existing Christian fire practices in the Easter Vigil, alternative seasonal fire rituals, and token-burning for prayer and spiritual reflection (Chapter 6).

There is no universally accepted definition of ritual, but certain characteristics are associated with ritual praxis.¹⁶² For example, rituals are not merely recited, but performed.¹⁶³ Communication takes place through bodily action (both verbal and non-verbal) and interactions with images and symbols.¹⁶⁴ This means that participants do not only engage with rituals on an intellectual level, but aesthetically, bodily, and emotionally.¹⁶⁵ This aspect of ritual calls for both participants and scholars to engage with the sensory and affective dimensions of ritual and ritual images.¹⁶⁶ In my analyses of community fire rituals, therefore, I will examine how embodied interactions with fire constitute a central part of the participants' ritual experience, especially in the liminal phase of rites of passage.¹⁶⁷

Rituals have been described as systems of communication via symbols in particular, where one thing refers to another within the ritual schema.¹⁶⁸ As such, rituals provide particularly relevant examples for the study of imagery, since metaphors, symbols, and signs

¹⁶¹ "What's on this Year - An Annual Scottish Events Calendar," VisitScotland, accessed 25 September 2017, <https://www.visitscotland.com/see-do/events/calendar>.

¹⁶² Ronald L. Grimes, *Ritual Criticism: Case Studies in Its Practice, Essays on Its Theory*, 2nd ed. (Waterloo, Canada: Ritual Studies International, 2014), 11-12.

¹⁶³ Grimes, *Ritual Criticism*, 11.

¹⁶⁴ Grimes, *Ritual Criticism*, 11.

¹⁶⁵ Bell, *Ritual Theory*, 100.

¹⁶⁶ Turner, "Frame," 469.

¹⁶⁷ Paul Stoller, *The Power of the Between: An Anthropological Odyssey* (University of Chicago Press, 2008; Chicago Scholarship Online, 2013), 33, accessed 13 September 2018, doi: 10.7208/chicago/9780226775364.003.0010.

¹⁶⁸ Stephen Buckland, "Ritual, Bodies, and 'Cultural Memory,'" in *Liturgy and the Body*, ed. Louis-Marie Chauvet and François Kabasele Lumbala (London: SCM Press, 1995), 49.

reveal ways an image is codified in order to address the concerns of the community.¹⁶⁹ In addition, they demonstrate the range of applications which can be drawn from a single root image, such as fire. A significant portion of the thesis will assess how the image of fire is integrated into the symbolic and conceptual frameworks of the chosen community during these rituals. Particular attention will be given to those aspects of fire imagery which resonate with the theological imagination. Such theological resonances will indicate the relevance and utility of the image of fire in Christian settings.

In my consideration of the image of fire in ritual, I hold the view that ritual can go beyond ‘empty symbols of conformity.’¹⁷⁰ This research follows the view that even repeated, traditional rituals offer a potent means of change and identity formation within communities.¹⁷¹ This is not to say that empty ritual is impossible; on the contrary, rituals conducted by rote may fail to operate with vitality.¹⁷² Nonetheless, ritual remains the tool of both the community and the individual to explore aspects of identity and belonging.¹⁷³ As some of my chosen examples will indicate, contemporary British rituals may be used to recover a sense of belonging in the natural world as well as within human communities.¹⁷⁴ Many of the fire rituals examined in this thesis have been conceived as a way for participants to identify with the changes of the natural world, giving them opportunity to process and respond to seasonal transitions.¹⁷⁵ The three case studies may all be described as seasonal fire rituals, or what Bell refers to as ‘calendrical rites.’¹⁷⁶

¹⁶⁹ Geertz, *Interpretation*, 89.

¹⁷⁰ Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology* (London/New York: Routledge, 1996), 3.

¹⁷¹ Buckland, “Ritual,” 53-55.

¹⁷² Leonel L. Mitchell, *The Meaning of Ritual* (New York/Ramsey/Toronto: Paulist Press, 1977), xii.

¹⁷³ Sondra L. Hausner, *The Spirits of Crossbones Graveyard: Time, Ritual, and Sexual Commerce in London* (Bloomington/Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2016), 13-14; 24.

¹⁷⁴ Drane, *Spirituality*, 64.

¹⁷⁵ The desire to re-connect with the natural world is a motivating factor for the rituals of the Beltane Fire Society and the Forest Church movement (discussed in Chapters 5 and 6, respectively).

¹⁷⁶ Bell, *Perspectives*, 102.

Through ritual performance, communities and individuals participate in specific cultural and religious narratives which help them make sense of human experience.¹⁷⁷ As a result, ritual practices actively contribute to the continual re-shaping and self-definition of the community.¹⁷⁸ Individual participants locate themselves within the community during the ritual and see their experience reflected in the experience of others.¹⁷⁹ Anthropologist of religion Sondra L. Hausner explains that the ‘socially cohesive function of ritual’ brings the in-group together, but it does so by affirming their ‘differentiation’ from outsiders.¹⁸⁰ The same rites which consolidate community identity do so in resistance to groups and structures which fall outside the bounds of the community’s norms.¹⁸¹ The study of ritual imagery grants insight into a community’s expression of both *who they are* and *who they are not*.

Communities may deliberately create new rites or re-imagine existing practices to address their current needs.¹⁸² Ritual theorist Catherine Bell notes that ‘ritual invention’ is now more socially acceptable in western society than in previous generations, when individuals and groups were considered to lack the moral or religious authority required to conduct their own rituals.¹⁸³ Although it is by no means a new phenomenon, innovation in ritual has become a more visible process in the 20th and 21st centuries.¹⁸⁴ Notably, many of the contemporary fire practices included in this research do not have long, inviolable histories. Most are recent innovations which draw on pre-existing notions and practices,

¹⁷⁷ Nathan Mitchell, “Rite, Ritual,” in *The New SCM Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship*, ed. Paul Bradshaw (London: SCM Press, 2002), 409.

¹⁷⁸ Hausner, *Spirits*, 193.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 24.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 14.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 14; 16.

¹⁸² Ross Tinsley and Catherine Matheson, “Layers of Passage: The ritual performance and liminal bleed of the Beltane Fire Festival, Edinburgh,” in *Rituals and Traditional Events in the Modern World*, ed. Jennifer Laing and Warwick Frost (Abingdon/New York: Routledge, 2014), 156.

¹⁸³ Bell, *Perspectives*, 223-224; 241.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 224-225.

having only been formalised in the modern and/or post-modern eras.¹⁸⁵ In terms of Christian ritual, alternative expressions of Christian community have embraced the innovation of new ritual practices with the aim of providing new methods of engaging with the Christian faith.¹⁸⁶ Contextualising the image of fire for contemporary Christian settings means taking into account its potential for both traditional and alternative practices. Hence, this thesis follows the ‘process model’ of ritual criticism, which accepts that ritual performance and meaning are not fixed but ‘a cultural and historical *process* [original emphasis].’¹⁸⁷ Variations in the way human participants understand and perform their rituals mean that even the most established rituals are, to some degree, in flux.

Case study selection

The Stonehaven Fireball Ceremony, Beltane Fire Festival, and Up-Helly-Aa were chosen as comparable rituals which operate within similar ritual and social frameworks. Their selection was based on their similarities to one another, as well as to certain examples of Christian practice presented in Chapter 6. First, each case study focuses on a ritual organised and performed by a local community group, primarily for the benefit of group members. Members of the public are invited to spectate and/or participate in elements of the ritual performance to varying degrees. Not only is this in keeping with the Christian rituals discussed later in the thesis, but public accessibility made it possible to arrange site visits for first-hand observation. I have therefore been able to use observation to inform my critical analysis of the rituals. Conducting research ‘on the ground’ was necessary to achieve a depth of analysis, since few scholars have written about these events, and none have conducted a dedicated study of the image of fire within the rituals. I was unable to find any scholarly work on the Stonehaven Fireball Ceremony, and only a small amount has been published on

¹⁸⁵ This will also become evident in the discussion of the Beltane Fire Festival and Up-Helly-Aa (Chapter 5) and various alternative forms of Christian worship (Chapter 6).

¹⁸⁶ Specific examples of alternative Christian ritual will be discussed in Chapter 6.

¹⁸⁷ Mitchell, “Rite, Ritual,” 409.

the Beltane Fire Festival.¹⁸⁸ The last major study on Up-Helly-Aa, undertaken by historian Callum G. Brown, was published two decades ago (1998). Independent observation of the Stonehaven Fireball Ceremony, Beltane Fire Festival, and Up-Helly-Aa thus constitutes part of the original contribution made to scholarship through this thesis.

Second, all three case studies take place in Scottish community contexts. Although the findings will be applied to a wider geographic context of British Christianity in general, the cultural compatibility underpinning the three case studies will highlight the considerable potential for variation in the reception of fire imagery. Even when the image of fire is applied within compatible social or conceptual frameworks (as may be found between Christian communities) its presentation and reception may differ.

Third, the three Scottish fire rituals mark occasions in which community members celebrate a significant date in their calendar. This is much the same as the celebration of the certain festivals in Christian liturgical cycle, such as the annual celebration of Christmas and Easter. The Stonehaven Fireball Ceremony, Beltane Fire Festival, and Lerwick's Up-Helly-Aa each represent a rite of passage responding to seasonal change. A rite of passage is any ritual which is intended to facilitate a transition of status, whether socially or psychologically.¹⁸⁹

Times of transition, such as in seasonal or life changes, may be infused with uncertainty and existential doubt. Rites of passage give the individual and community a way to process change and allow a potentially damaging experience to be transformational rather than destructive.¹⁹⁰ Such transitional rites also help maintain community bonds in the face of change. Hausner observes the value of ritual as a means 'to establish a continuity of community over time.'¹⁹¹ Participants of the Stonehaven Fireball Ceremony, Beltane Fire Festival, and Lerwick's Up-Helly-Aa construct their identity not only in relation to the present community, but in relation to those who have gone before.

¹⁸⁸ Social anthropologists Ross Tinsley and Catherine Matheson have published three articles on the Beltane Fire Festival and its implications for tourism (one article co-authored with Russell Rimmer; details in Chapter 5). In particular, see Tinsley and Matheson, "Layers of Passage," 141-158.

¹⁸⁹ Bjørn Thomassen, *Liminality and the Modern: Living Through the In-Between* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), 1.

¹⁹⁰ Drane, *Spirituality*, 45.

¹⁹¹ Hausner, *Spirits*, 13.

Ritual theorists distinguish between calendrical (seasonal) rites and life-cycle transitions. Bell explains that calendrical rites follow the predictable patterns of the passage of time, especially changes associated with the seasons.¹⁹² Calendrical rites connect events in the natural world with ‘the rhythm of social life,’ allowing the community to imbue seasonal change with social and cultural significance.¹⁹³ Life-cycle rites, meanwhile, mark a new stage of a person’s life in relation to the corresponding change in social role or status.¹⁹⁴ For example, a newborn child may be integrated into the community through a naming rite (such as infant baptism); and romantic partners may take on a new social role as a married couple, ratifying their new status through marriage rites.

Bell considers life-cycle rites to be synonymous with rites of passage, while calendrical rites are to be treated as a separate, though related, category.¹⁹⁵ Certainly, Arnold van Gennep emphasised life-cycle rites in his seminal work, *Les Rites de Passage* (‘The Rites of Passage’) in which he detailed his model for interpreting transitional rites.¹⁹⁶ However, van Gennep embraced both life-cycle rites and calendrical rites within the same ritual category.¹⁹⁷ He explicitly incorporated calendrical rites into rites of passage: ‘Those rites which accompany and bring about the change of the year, the season, or the month, should also be included in ceremonies [rites] of passage.’¹⁹⁸ He goes on to briefly discuss certain seasonal rituals, such as celebrations of the solstice and equinox, which he describes as ‘[r]ites of passage which conform to the usual pattern.’¹⁹⁹ Hence, the treatment of seasonal rituals as rites of passage remains in keeping with van Gennep’s original theory.

¹⁹² Bell, *Perspectives*, 102.

¹⁹³ Ibid.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., 94.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 94-95; 102.

¹⁹⁶ Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, trans. Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1960).

¹⁹⁷ Van Gennep, *Rites*, 3-4; 178-179; 189.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 178.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., 179.

Since my case studies examine seasonal rituals, they provide examples of community transitions rather than rites focused on particular individuals. In terms of the ritual use of images, Victor Turner argues that seasonal rites of passage are less ‘linear’ in expression than life-cycle rites. Rather than relying on symbolism pertaining to a particular stage of life (for example, birth, growth, maturity, and death), seasonal rites ‘frame’ symbols and images within the flow of the ritual.²⁰⁰ There may be ‘confusion of ordinary everyday categories’ within seasonal rituals, such as the blurring of social hierarchy, gender roles, or expected modes of behaviour.²⁰¹

Rites of passage provide the conditions for liminal experience, wherein normative social and psychological structures are destabilised to permit the transition from one state to another.²⁰² Turner defined liminality as ‘a state or process which is betwixt-and-between the normal, day-to-day cultural and social states and processes...’²⁰³ The concept of liminality will form a recurring topic within our analysis, as it is under liminal conditions that imagery is most open to interpretation during ritual performance. During times of liminality, participants are encouraged to be open to the restructuring of ideas and identities.²⁰⁴ The suspension or deconstruction of normative structures thus engenders an intuitive approach to the reception of imagery. Any meaning construed in the image of fire during times of liminality is not fixed but subject to continuous reinterpretation.²⁰⁵ Through the comparison of the Stonehaven Fireball Ceremony, Beltane Fire Festival, and Lerwick’s Up-Helly-Aa, we will discover ways in which particular communities have used the image of fire to explore themes of transition and identity.

Critical analysis of community fire rituals will demonstrate that the image of fire is not restricted to a predetermined list of dominant associations. Instead, there is scope for considerable variation in how the image of fire is applied and understood within its context.

²⁰⁰ Turner, “Frame,” 467.

²⁰¹ Ibid., 466.

²⁰² Thomassen, *Liminality*, 2.

²⁰³ Turner, “Frame,” 465.

²⁰⁴ Thomassen, *Liminality*, 1.

²⁰⁵ As evidenced by Tinsley and Matheson, “Layers of Passage,” 147.

Images are ‘vehicles’ for meaning which are complexified by their inherent ambiguity.²⁰⁶ In Turner’s phrasing, they are ‘semantically “open”’ and thus give rise to various interpretations on both the communal and individual levels.²⁰⁷ Each ritual examined as part of this research will provide an example of how the image of fire has been applied for a specific purpose, revealing factors which influence the presentation and reception of fire imagery. Ritual examples are particularly relevant because they offer an environment in which participants explore connections between a variety of concepts and images.²⁰⁸ The interplay between concept and image will be instrumental for our consideration of the image of fire for Christian practice, taken up in the final chapter, where theological ideas are expressed and explored through the application of fire imagery.

In establishing suitable approaches to imagery and ritual throughout this introduction, I have already indicated some particular contextual and conceptual considerations for the present research. Prior to pursuing these ideas, a final task remains: to address the overall trajectory and organisation of the thesis. The following section will clarify the structure of the research with a thesis overview, before providing a brief account of each chapter.

4. Structure and research trajectory: a thesis in three movements

Thesis Overview

Existing literature on the subject of fire and contemporary culture has catalogued many points of intersection between fire and human society, but contextualising the image of fire for use in a specific setting requires a more selective approach. In order to provide a clear progression from biblical, social, and ritual contexts to specifically Christian applications, this thesis is organised into three movements or phases, each composed of two chapters. As in a musical composition, each movement represents a stage in the development of the whole. The movements are connected not only through a central thread or argument, but through variations on the themes which emerge. This musical terminology is used to suggest

²⁰⁶ Turner, “Symbolic Studies,” 146; 152.

²⁰⁷ Turner, “Symbolic Studies,” 154.

²⁰⁸ Geertz, *Interpretation*, 112.

a dynamic and reciprocal relationship between each section, wherein ideas and observations are presented in conversation with the entirety of the thesis.

The thesis begins by orientating the reader to dominant trends in the reception of fire, both in the biblical texts and in contemporary British society. It is here, in the first movement of the thesis, that we will begin to see how the image of fire may resonate within the theological imagination by virtue of its cultural associations. The second movement explores ways in which contemporary cultural associations around fire are built on, and subverted, by certain communal and ritual practices in Britain and Northern Ireland. Critical observation of specific community events and rituals will reveal ways in which the multivalence of fire imagery is utilised to communicate meaning, construct identity, and enable personal and communal transitions. Possibilities for theological applications of the image will begin to come to the fore, especially through attention to the role of fire imagery in facilitating liminal experiences.

The third and final movement will apply the analytical frameworks developed throughout the thesis to the use of fire imagery in existing Christian practices. Contextual information from previous chapters will guide interpretation of several fire practices found within both established church tradition and alternative expressions of Christianity in contemporary Britain. I will consider the theological resonances of fire imagery in these practices, along with a consideration of how these resonances may be received by participants of Christian fire rites. This will lead to the conclusion of the thesis, which will consider how the theological resonances of fire can be taken forward in Christian contexts in order to facilitate deeper theological and imaginative engagement with the multivalence of fire imagery. In sum, the thesis follows a structure of orientation, observation, and application. The specific aims and methodology of each phase of the thesis are outlined below, with the intention of providing an overview of the research and its trajectory at each stage.

Chapters 2 & 3: Orientation

The opening movement of the thesis highlights ways in which biblical and contemporary fire imagery are compatible with a range of theological concerns, including creation, destruction, cleansing, and renewal. These enquiries into biblical fire imagery and 21st century encounters with fire will form the groundwork for the thesis as a whole. Rather than

focusing on disentangling discrete correspondences between the source and target domains of the image, the discussion will acknowledge the suggestive power of ambiguity in the production and reception of fire imagery. Conceptualising the image of fire as ‘multivalent’ will guard against any temptation to define the image too concretely, and provide room for an analysis which extends beyond simplistic readings of the image.

If the image of fire is to be contextualised for Christian practice, then understanding the fire imagery of Christianity’s sacred text is a necessary part of the process.²⁰⁹ Biblical fire imagery is theologically nuanced and often ambiguous, but its multivalent character has not always been reflected in Christian thought. The discussion of biblical encounters with fire in Chapter 2 seeks to deconstruct the myth that biblical fire imagery is characterised by ‘negative’ and ‘positive’ theological associations. Instead, an assessment of the varied applications of fire in the text will establish the multivalence of the image in the Bible. Exploring the multivalence of fire imagery will provide fresh insights into the use of fire in biblical texts, reconceptualising fire in the Bible as a means of divine-human interaction. Biblical fire imagery will also indicate that the sensory dimensions of fire can open up new avenues for imaginative and theological engagement.

Once I have established fire as a legitimate and multivalent theological image, I will turn to assess the contemporary British experience of fire. Chapter 3 contends that the multivalence of the image of fire has endured into the present age, but has been altered (and oftentimes restricted) by the radical shift in cultural attitudes towards fire. With the rise of electricity and an increased emphasis on fire prevention, Britain’s recent history has seen a decline in the visibility of fire in domestic spaces. In this chapter, I will consider how the defamiliarisation of fire has affected the reception of fire in the British social imagination, as well as considering the implications for how the image of fire is construed within a contemporary context. I will note points of similarity and divergence between the biblical uses of fire imagery and modern associations with the image of fire, focusing on conceptions of fire as practical necessity, entertaining diversion, and unwelcome threat.

²⁰⁹ Christine Helmer, Steven Linn McKenzie, Thomas Chr. Römer, Jens Schröter, Barry Dov Walfish, Eric Ziolkowski, “Introduction,” in *Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Reception Online* (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2009), accessed 4 May 2018, https://www.degruyter.com/staticfiles/content/dbsup/EBR_02_Introduction.pdf.

Chapters 4 & 5: Observation

The central movement of the thesis examines how the image of fire has been utilised by certain communities as a means of self-expression. In these instances, communities have integrated particular aspects of the image of fire into their communal practices, utilising the multivalence of fire imagery to facilitate engagement with the values, narratives, and identity of the group. Using insights from previous chapters regarding fire in the social imagination, I will use selected case studies to observe the interplay between community context and ritual applications of the image. This will serve not only to illustrate the complex relationship between imagery and context, but also to indicate ways in which the image of fire can be used to explore abstract concepts and experiences. Drawing on my research thus far, I will then suggest some common themes for the analysis of fire imagery in community ritual contexts. Based on these themes, I will utilise a tripartite analytical framework incorporating *communication and participation*; *purification and creative transformation*; and *fire as presence*.

Chapter 4 will explore the relationship between multivalence and community context in the interpretation of fire imagery. Using the example of David Best's installation artwork *Temple*, I will examine how the image of fire is constructed in reference to a community's specific cultural and historical context; and how dominant associations with fire imagery can nonetheless be subverted by exploiting the image's multivalence. I will then assess the multiplicity of fire imagery in the ceremonies of the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games, arguing that the multivalence of fire imagery allows it to be continually re-applied and re-interpreted even within the same community setting. My observations in this chapter are based on the televised footage of Best's *Temple* and the London 2012 ceremonies, as well as primary and secondary sources. Due to the lack of relevant academic source material, it will be necessary to describe these events in some detail to facilitate their analysis. My research, therefore, provides a scholarly account of both *Temple* and the London 2012 ceremonies which details their use of fire and fire imagery.

As the discussion moves towards locating the image of fire within contemporary Christian practice, we will build on our contextual understanding of fire imagery to consider its role in ritual performance. Chapter 5 will undertake critical observation of three transitional fire rituals in contemporary Scotland. These are the Stonehaven Fireball

Ceremony, a new year celebration in Aberdeenshire; the Beltane Fire Festival in Edinburgh, which marks the transition from winter to spring/summer; and the winter fire festival of Up-Helly-Aa, celebrated in the Shetland Islands. As communal rites of passage, each event uses fire imagery to help participants explore questions of identity and process times of change. The role of fire imagery within these rituals has received limited scholarly attention, despite the centrality of fire in their conception and ritual performance. As a result, a certain amount of descriptive work will be necessary to record the findings of my site visits and develop my research in light of these observations. As in the case of Best's *Temple* and London 2012, the description of fire and fire imagery at Stonehaven Fireball Ceremony, Beltane Fire Festival, and Up-Helly-Aa constitutes part of my original contribution to scholarship.

In Chapter 5, I will explore how the image and presence of fire shapes personal and communal identity through its role in generating liminal experience. Analytical frameworks developed throughout earlier parts of the thesis will provide critical tools to conduct our own thorough analysis. The Stonehaven Fireball Ceremony, Beltane Fire Festival, and Up-Helly-Aa are characterised by multivalent and multiplicitous applications of fire imagery. The three themes identified in Chapter 4 will help to disentangle the various forms and functions of the image of fire as it is applied in each ritual. First, the image of fire communicates the ideas and values of the community, inviting physical and imaginative participation in particular forms of community self-expression. Second, the image of fire mediates rites of purification and creative transformation as participants transition from one ritual state to another. Third, fire generates a sense of presence which calls for a response in the form of ritual actions. Considering the significance of fire imagery within these ritual contexts will direct us towards applications for Christian practice, and especially those dimensions of the image which resonate with the Christian theological imagination.

Chapters 6 & 7: Application

In the final movement of the thesis, the findings of the preceding chapters will be applied to the image of fire in Christian contexts. Having gained a fuller understanding of the image of fire in biblical texts, the contemporary imagination, and community ritual, we will be in a position to consider explicitly Christian encounters with fire according to relevant social and theological frameworks. As in other community rituals, the image of fire facilitates

communication and participation, purification and creative transformation, and a sense of presence for Christian fire practices. These themes do not merely describe certain ritual functions of the image and presence of fire, but indicate potential theological applications of fire as well.

Using examples from both established church tradition and alternative Christian practice, Chapter 6 will demonstrate ways the multivalence of fire imagery has been used to convey theological ideas. The physical presence of fire in traditional Easter Vigil liturgies and in Christian token-burning will be of particular interest within this chapter, which will propose that the sensory aspects of fire in these practices provide opportunity for deeper engagement with the image's multivalence. I will argue that, in contributing to the experience and exploration of ritual liminality, the presence and image of fire can enhance the ritual efficacy of Christian worship. The multivalence of fire imagery is significant for each of these examples, but oftentimes goes unexplored by scholars and practitioners alike. By noting the potential for further theological exploration of fire imagery in such contexts, the assessment of existing Christian practices will highlight the need for critical reflection regarding the use of fire imagery in Christian worship. Considering various applications of fire imagery will demonstrate how, even in similar faith-based settings, the image of fire needs to be approached with careful attention to context, and sensitivity with regard to its social and theological reception.

The conclusions of the research are presented in Chapter 7. In this final chapter, the three movements of the thesis will be synthesised to suggest how the image of fire can be more effectively integrated into contemporary Christian ritual. I will evaluate how biblical interpretation, contemporary associations, and ritual setting affect the presentation and reception of the image of fire for Christian practice. In doing so, I will identify contextual issues to be considered when approaching the application and interpretation of fire imagery in such settings. Drawing together the multivalence of fire imagery with observations regarding the sensory and liminal aspects of the image, the conclusion will assert the value of fire imagery for imaginative engagement in Christian ritual practice. I will highlight a range of theological resonances based on trends evident throughout the thesis. These resonances are not presented as a comprehensive list of correspondences between fire and theological ideas; rather, they will be indicative of the image's broad theological potential.

First movement: Orientation

Chapters 2 & 3:

Biblical encounters with fire

Contemporary encounters with fire

Chapter 2: Biblical Encounters with Fire

The first step in contextualising the image of fire for contemporary Christian practice is to become orientated to the cultural and social contexts which underlie the ways that the image is conceived. This is the purpose of the first movement of the thesis, beginning here with the discussion of biblical encounters with fire. The characterisation of fire in the Bible is by no means peripheral to the contemporary practice of the Christian faith, despite the temporal and cultural distance which separates contemporary receivers of the Bible from the cultures which produced the biblical texts. Contemporary Christian practice is the inheritor of a long tradition of translation, interpretation, and reception of the Bible and its imagery.²¹⁰ The Christian tradition has drawn upon biblical fire imagery in its theological language, and the reception of biblical fire imagery has shaped Christian practice and liturgy from the early church onwards.²¹¹

In the brief critical review contained in my opening chapter, I identified a trend in the reception of biblical fire imagery to conceptualise aspects of fire and fire imagery as either ‘positive’ or ‘negative’ — or, as the *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* suggests, ‘ideal’ and ‘unideal.’²¹² Typically, the ‘positive’ or ‘ideal’ aspects of fire include its capacity to warm, illuminate, purify, and nourish.²¹³ The consuming nature of fire, meanwhile, produces the ‘negative’ or ‘unideal’ connotations of death, destruction, and divine judgement.²¹⁴ Since there is no specific mention of fire in the creation narratives of Genesis 1-2, Genesis does not explicitly reassure the modern reader that fire is a constituent part of the ‘very good’ world

²¹⁰ Helmer, et al., “Introduction.”

²¹¹ Allison et al., *Encyclopedia*, s.v. “fire.”

²¹² Ryken et al., *Biblical Imagery*, xviii.

²¹³ Ryken et al., *Biblical Imagery*, xix; Allison et al., *Encyclopedia*, s.v. “fire.”

²¹⁴ Ryken et al., *Biblical Imagery*, xix; Allison et al., *Encyclopedia*, s.v. “fire.”

which God crafts into existence (Genesis 1:31).²¹⁵ Instead, fire first occurs as a flaming sword at the boundary of Eden. When the Lord drives Eve and Adam from the garden, he sends an angel with ‘a sword flaming and turning to guard the way to the tree of life’ (Genesis 3:24).

It may appear that the image of the flaming sword sets the tone for the image of fire in the Bible. Fire and the sword come together during the battles of Joshua, Judges, and the monarchic period (for instance, Joshua 8:19; Judges 1:8; 1 Samuel 30:1). Animal sacrifice involves the slaughter of an animal to burn upon the altar (e.g. Exodus 29; Leviticus 3). The Lord’s prophets are able to call down ‘fire from heaven’ to destroy those who oppose their divinely-given authority (see, for example, Elijah’s actions in 2 Kings 1:9-16).

The consuming nature of fire from heaven raises difficult moral and theological questions, and the association between fire and destruction may be uncomfortable for many contemporary receivers of the Bible. Destruction is a charged concept which resonates with the contemporary British fear of fire (explored in Chapter 3). Christian practitioners might object that biblical associations between fire and destruction, divine judgement, and cultic sacrifice make fire an unsuitable image for the celebration of life and salvation in Jesus Christ. At best, these ‘negative’ aspects of fire may be considered obsolete to Christian spirituality; at worst, they usher in conceptions of blood sacrifice, hellfire, and an angry God. In this chapter, I will reframe the destructive nature of fire as a prerequisite for its religious and theological functions as an image of purification and divine presence, and a mode of divine/human interaction.

Theophany is generally considered a ‘positive’ application of fire imagery, evoking the life-giving, illuminating, and energising force connoted by the image of fire.²¹⁶ However, one of the most foundational theophanic narratives — the manifestation of God to Israel at Sinai — describes the blazing threat of fire, smoke, and storm which shrouds the deity from view (Exodus 19:18). The people of Israel are warned not to set foot on the holy mountain, lest they be destroyed by God, who is called a ‘devouring fire’ (Exodus 24:17; Deuteronomy 4:24

²¹⁵ The creation of the sun is referred to primarily in terms of light, not fire (Genesis 1:16). Where I quote the biblical texts, I refer to the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) unless otherwise specified.

²¹⁶ Ryken et al., *Biblical Imagery*, s.v. “fire.”

and elsewhere). The ‘negative’ trait of fire’s destruction thus collides with the ‘positive’ category of divine presence. The biblical association between the image of fire and divine presence provides a theological imperative for interrogating conventional categories of fire imagery. If the image of fire is so closely identified with the being and presence of the divine, then our understanding of fire imagery carries considerable theological import.

Contemporary hermeneutical approaches which seek to categorise biblical fire imagery in terms of a binary framework overlook both contextual and theological nuances evident in the texts. Biblical fire imagery is characterised by literary and theological ambiguity, reflecting the nature of the texts themselves. The Bible is composed of ancient documents from many different authors, editors, time periods, and geographical and political circumstances.

In this chapter, I contend that the ‘negative’ and ‘positive’ aspects of the image of fire are better conceptualised as interdependent qualities with a range of theological applications. By examining selected examples from biblical texts, I will demonstrate how biblical conceptions of the image of fire integrate the destructive, creative, and purificatory aspects of fire. Fire forms a motif of divine-human interaction through the multivalent imagery of fire from heaven, theophany, and sacrifice. Apocalyptic texts of the Hebrew Bible and New Testament draw on the complexity of fire imagery to express the cleansing, judgement, and renewal that accompanies the Lord’s cosmic victories. These more threatening, transcendental images are punctuated by the fiery arrival of the Holy Spirit in the book of Acts, which conveys an immanent manifestation of divine presence and empowerment by re-applying fire imagery from elsewhere in the biblical tradition. Contextualising biblical fire imagery in this way will offer insights to the ways the image of fire in the Bible can speak to contemporary Christian practice.

1. Fire from heaven: signs of judgement and covenant

The consuming nature of fire is a core feature of biblical fire imagery. By categorising destruction as a ‘negative’ aspect of fire, the modern reader makes a value judgement regarding the meaning of the text. Once liberated from a binary framework, engagement with the multivalence of fire imagery can lead to more nuanced perspectives on apparently simple categories. The multivalence of fire imagery provides a way to contextualise the

consuming character of fire according to a wider set of associations which go beyond categories of 'positive' and 'negative'.

Fire is not only an image of judgement in the Bible. Like any other part of the created order (established in the creation narratives of Genesis 1-2), fire can be considered 'one of the gifts of creation' freely available to human beings.²¹⁷ Across the history of biblical culture, fire was brought into the very heart of the community by virtue of being at the very heart of the household.²¹⁸ For ancient Israel and first century Palestine, fire was a vital tool for human survival. Food production, cottage industry, heating, and domestic lighting were all reliant on the presence of fire in the home.²¹⁹ The domesticity of fire points towards its familiarity within social context and daily life. There are a number of biblical references to the daily practices of cooking, especially baking (Exodus 6:23; Isaiah 44:15-19; also 1 Samuel 28:24).

Biblical fire imagery does not divorce the destructive aspects of fire from its more domestic aspects. In Leviticus 13:51-55, for instance, destruction by fire is the prescribed method of disposal for contaminated clothing. The process of cleansing by fire transfers into the spiritual domain, since fire is used to purify people and objects ritually as well as physically (see, for example, the purificatory sacrifices detailed in Leviticus 12 and 14). Fire itself is not good or bad, positive or negative: it is a means of survival, a tool of industry, and a weapon of warfare (see, for example, Judges 18:27). The biblical texts do not reveal a cultural fear of fire in the general sense, but rather an awareness of its power as a force of nature. Fire is counted alongside dramatic (and potentially destructive) environmental conditions as whirlwinds, earthquakes, thunder and tempests (see Isaiah 29:6).

Due to the power and uncontrollability of these phenomena, human beings are presented as being powerless before them.²²⁰ By contrast, God commands authority over the behaviour, appearance, and destructiveness of fire. In Daniel 3, for example, Shadrach, Meshach, and

²¹⁷ Ryken et al., *Biblical Imagery*, s.v. "fire."

²¹⁸ Isserlin, *Israelites*, 124-125.

²¹⁹ Ferdinand E. Deist, *The Material Culture of the Bible: An Introduction* (London/New York: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 196.

²²⁰ Deist, *Material Culture*, 122.

Abednego are thrown into a ‘furnace of blazing fire’ only to be saved by divine intervention (Daniel 3:23-27). This divine rescue does not require the flames to be extinguished, or for the men to be spirited away. In this narrative, the God of Israel overcomes fire directly, even in the face of all its destructiveness.

God’s mastery over fire is conveyed through the motif of fire from heaven. God sends fire as a means of judgement, a token of approval, and a sign of divine presence. For contemporary readers, the image of fire from heaven may call to mind the plague of fire and hail on Egypt in Exodus 9 or the burning sulphur which falls in judgement of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19. The toxicity of the sulphur, as well as the consuming flames, render this judgement particularly final.²²¹ A similar idea is reflected in the apocalyptic texts of the New Testament. In the book of Revelation, fire and sulphur signal the final defeat of God’s enemies (Revelation 20). Like salted soil, land infused with sulphur cannot sustain life. Jude 1:7 and 2 Peter 2:6 draw on the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah ‘a symbol of total and irrevocable judgment’ on those who have turned away from God.²²²

Through its consuming power, fire from heaven demarcates and enforces the limitations of the divine-human relationship. The accounts of Nadab and Abihu (Leviticus 10) and the rebellion of Korah (Numbers 16) demonstrate the cost of flouting divinely-established boundaries. Nadab and Abihu offer ‘unholy’ or ‘strange’ fire by burning their incense ‘such as the Lord had not commanded them’ (Leviticus 10:1).²²³ Their decision to make this unsolicited offering by fire is mirrored in the type of punishment: ‘the brothers lifted up their “alien” fire towards God and God poured out his fire back on them.’²²⁴ A similar event takes place in Numbers 16, in which the household of Korah offers incense illegitimately as part of a rebellious act. The two hundred and fifty men who burned the incense are ‘consumed’ by

²²¹ Ryken et al., *Biblical Imagery*, s.v. “brimstone.”

²²² Ibid., s.v. “Sodom and Gomorrah.” See also Deuteronomy 29:23; Jeremiah 49:18.

²²³ For a discussion on the nature of Nadab and Abihu’s offence, see John C. H. Laughlin, “The ‘Strange Fire’ of Nadab and Abihu,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 95, no. 4 (1976): 559-565, accessed 19 October 2014, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3265571>.

²²⁴ Raz Kletter and Irit Ziffer, “Incense-Burning Rituals: From Philistine Fire Pans at Yavneh to the Improper Fire of Korah,” *Israel Exploration Journal* 60, no. 2 (2010): 180, accessed 19 October 2014, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27927262>.

fire which ‘came out from the Lord’ (Numbers 16:35). The consuming fire cleanses the people of profanity as the offenders are forever removed from the camp.²²⁵

Fire of divine origin is not solely an instrument of judgement and destruction, however. In Genesis 15, divine fire manifests to forge a new covenantal relationship between God and Abram. Exodus 3:1-6 describes God’s appearance in fire to Moses, manifesting in a burning bush which is consumed neither by the fire nor by God’s divine presence. As the Hebrews flee Egypt in Exodus 13:17-22, God leads them through the wilderness with a pillar of fire and cloud. Thus, heavenly fire offers the illumination by which the otherwise defenceless, directionless nomadic nation may travel (as Nehemiah 9:12 observes). There is no sense of destruction or consuming in this flame, though this fire may foreshadow later and more threatening encounters with the Lord at Sinai and elsewhere.²²⁶ When God appears in fire atop the holy mountain, the otherworldly blaze shrouds the divinity from human sight (Exodus 19:18; Deuteronomy 5:22).

Fire sent from heaven may therefore be a sign of divine presence. For Aaron, Elijah, David, and Solomon, fire is sent by the Lord to kindle the burnt-offering on the altar. In such cases, fire is taken as a good omen: an answer from the Lord (1 Kings 18:36-39; 1 Chronicles 21:26) or confirmation of dedication rites (Leviticus 9:24; 2 Chronicles 7:1). In 2 Kings 2:11, Elijah does not die a natural death, but is taken up into heaven by a whirlwind that is accompanied by ‘a chariot of fire and horses of fire’ sent by God to retrieve him.

Spontaneous fire from heaven may be impressive enough; but its divine origin is underscored when flames appear in conditions in which fire cannot otherwise thrive. When God calls Gideon to lead the people of Israel, Gideon requests ‘a sign’ that the Lord is present with him. The angel of the Lord causes fire to spring from a rock to consume Gideon’s food offering (Judges 6:21). The Lord sends fire to consume the offering on Elijah’s water-soaked altar in 1 Kings 18, while the altars to Baal remain dry and unkindled. Fire is not only an expression of divine power, but attests to ‘God’s reality and approval.’²²⁷ Later, in

²²⁵ William Dyrness, *Themes in Old Testament Theology* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1979), 52.

²²⁶ James K. Bruckner, *Exodus*, Understanding the Bible Commentary Series (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 126.

²²⁷ Ryken et al., *Biblical Imagery*, s.v. “fire.”

2 Kings 1:9-16, Elijah uses the invocation of fire to demonstrate his identity as ‘a man of God’ in opposition to King Ahaziah’s forces, one hundred of whom are subsequently consumed by the fire which Elijah calls down. The presence, power, and endorsement of God is signified through fire in these narratives. Hence, the ability of a prophet to invoke heavenly fire both confirms their prophetic office and demonstrates the power of the living God.

2. Encountering God in the fires of theophany

Biblical fire theophanies present the self-revelation of God as dramatic, and often frightening, affairs. They are also intimate encounters in which God is revealed to the senses in the form of heat, light, and smoke. The image of fire provides a paradoxical, multifaceted image of God which points towards the complexity of divine reality.²²⁸ Fire describes something of divine nature, which cannot be defined in purely human terms. This section will consider how biblical texts use the image of fire to characterise human encounters with divine presence. Biblical accounts of theophany associate fire with divine-human interaction and the administering of the covenantal relationship between God and his people.

In Genesis 15, God uses fire to establish his covenant with Abram (later re-named Abraham). Abram is plunged into sleep amid a ‘deep and terrifying’ darkness (Genesis 15:12). The Lord describes the promises of covenant, and ‘[w]hen the sun had gone down and it was dark, a smoking fire-pot and a flaming torch passed between [the sacrificial] pieces’ (Genesis 15:17). The following verses indicate that once the fire has passed between the cut animals, the covenant agreement is complete.²²⁹ In the covenantal relationship, fire is used to facilitate communication and interaction between God and human beings.

The significance of the smoking pot and flaming torch is not directly explained in the text, but they have been taken as emblematic of the presence of the Lord.²³⁰ Fire and smoke are common features of theophany in the Hebrew Bible.²³¹ The fiery elements of the covenantal ritual are thus ‘signs’ of divine presence, the way in which God is shown to

²²⁸ Ryken et al., *Biblical Imagery*, s.v. “fire.”

²²⁹ Samuel E. Balentine, *The Torah’s Vision of Worship* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 105.

²³⁰ Ryken et al., *Biblical Imagery*, s.v. “fire.”

²³¹ Ibid.

personally enact the ritual while he simultaneously conceals himself in the dark (cf. Exodus 3:20).²³² The Lord passes through the animal pieces while Abram is asleep, indicating that God alone is making and confirming this covenant.²³³ If the darkness is a mysterious, supernatural darkness, so these burning objects are mysterious invasions of supernatural light.²³⁴ Niditch highlights the way in which fire generates atmosphere in the narrative: ‘The scene is strongly experiential: the fear, the smoky heat, and the darkness illuminated only by the torch all testify to a writer’s view of what it is like to encounter the power of God.’²³⁵ This experience is intense and intimate — through the sensation of heat, the inhalation of smoke — while maintaining a distinct sense of otherworldliness. The threat of the flames offers a keen reminder of human mortality in the face of the immortal divine. Simultaneously, however, the fire of this encounter inaugurates a new kind of relationship, one of intimacy and promise. Through this fire theophany, the Lord reveals his presence, communicates his promises to Abram, and establishes the covenant between God and his people.

Likewise, in the ‘burning bush’ of Exodus 3, Moses is confronted by an awe-inspiring and intensely personal revelation of the divine. It is at the burning bush that the Lord declares aspects of his own identity, his commissioning of Moses, and the destiny of God’s people. Translators suggest that Exodus 3:2 may describe the Lord’s presence manifesting not just *amongst* the flames, but ‘*as a flame of fire*’ (emphasis added.)²³⁶ The Lord’s presence, expressed through flame, renders the physical space holy (Exodus 3:5). Moses is warned not to violate the boundary which separates human and divine: to do so would invite death. Fire is powerful, unpredictable, and potentially devastating in its destructive capacity. One flare from the blazing bush and Moses could be scorched by the holiness of divine presence, or be

²³² Claus Westermann, *Genesis 12-36: A Commentary*, translated by John J. Scullion (London: SPCK, 1985), 228.

²³³ Balentine, *Vision*, 105; Robert Davidson, *Genesis 12-50* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 46.

²³⁴ As contrasted with the naturally-occurring sunset in verse 17; and the more general theme of spiritual darkness (Ryken et al., *Biblical Imagery*, s.v. “darkness”).

²³⁵ Susan Niditch, *Ancient Israelite Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 37.

²³⁶ Ryken et al., *Biblical Imagery*, s.v. “burning bush.”

consumed in the fire. Perhaps there is parallelism to be found between Moses and the bush: both encounter the presence of the Lord, yet neither are consumed.²³⁷

Fire is not incidental to these theophanies, or merely a cause for the patriarchs to pay attention. Niditch characterises theophanic fire as ‘the sensual context for the covenant,’ through which all who encounter the theophany ‘are drawn into the realm of the sacred.’²³⁸ At the burning bush, flames show all the signs of combustion (brightness and heat) without the destructive result.²³⁹ Human finitude is cast into sharp relief through the appearance of fire, which communicates divine power and holiness. In Exodus 3:5, for example, fire is explicitly associated with the boundaries of sacred space. The connection between fire and holiness echoes the holiness of the altar fire, as well as providing the covenantal context for the pillar of cloud and fire which guides Israel through the wilderness (Exodus 13:17-22).²⁴⁰ This, too, is a sign of divine presence and covenantal promise.²⁴¹

The fire theophanies narrated in Genesis and Exodus reach their geographic and thematic peak at Sinai. In contrast to the burning bush and the pillar of fire, the account of Sinai presents God as ‘devouring fire’ (Exodus 24:17). The divine appearance and law-giving at Sinai represent the first theophany in which God manifests his presence to communicate with the whole congregation of Israel. He chooses to do so in thunder, earthquake, smoke, and fire (Exodus 19:18-19). The heat and sound of such a huge fire, the boom of the thunder, the taste of smoke and smell of burning, the feeling of the earth moving: every sense must have been inundated with the presence of God.²⁴² Once again, the Lord reveals himself to the senses — physically and powerfully — so that his presence cannot be ignored or denied.

Deuteronomy 4:33 marvels at the fearsome uniqueness of this experience: ‘Has any people ever heard the voice of a god speaking out of a fire, as you have heard, and lived?’ As

²³⁷ The burning bush has also been interpreted as an image which prefigures the incarnation, the Virgin Mary, and the church; see Allison et al., *Encyclopedia*, s.v. “burning bush.”

²³⁸ Niditch, *Religion*, 37.

²³⁹ Bruckner, *Exodus*, 39.

²⁴⁰ Thomas B. Dozeman, *Commentary on Exodus*, Eerdmans Critical Commentary (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2009), 121.

²⁴¹ Bruckner, *Exodus*, 126; Dyrness, *Themes*, 152.

²⁴² Bruckner, *Exodus*, 176.

in the Eden narrative, fire is strongly associated with holiness, boundary, and threat. The Israelites are told to cleanse themselves, and ensure they adhere to ritual and geographical boundaries lest the Lord ‘break out against them’ (Exodus 19:22, 24). Impressions of indisputable divine authority are evoked in the description of the Lord’s presence: ‘Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke, because the Lord had descended upon it in fire; the smoke went up like the smoke of a kiln, while the whole mountain shook violently’ (Exodus 19:18). In view of widespread pottery production in Israel, the inclusion of a kiln as a point of comparison would have been a familiar touchstone by which to present something as utterly ineffable as divine manifestation.²⁴³

The Deuteronomic account of the law-giving at Horeb attests to ‘the fire, the cloud, and the thick darkness’ on the mountain (Deuteronomy 5:22). This description recalls the supernatural darkness and smoking pot of the covenant ritual between God and Abraham in Genesis 15. In this picture of darkness and brilliant flame, there is both grandeur and paradox.²⁴⁴ These natural forces work to veil the Lord from human sight while simultaneously providing a visual manifestation of his presence on the mountain. In the Exodus narrative smoke is a natural by-product of the flames, a testament to the scale of the fire and a veil which ‘wrap[s]’ the mountain. Fire, which in the wilderness revealed the way through its light, now conceals — but also heralds the giving of the law, which is its own brand of illumination (cf. Psalm 119:105).

When Moses re-ascends the mountain in Exodus 24:15-18, the description of his encounter with the Lord intensifies. Before, God ‘descended upon [Mount Sinai] in fire’ (Exodus 19:18); but now the image of fire is applied to the characterisation of God more personally, as he is likened to ‘a devouring fire on top of the mountain’ (Exodus 24:17). Deuteronomy likewise heightens the comparison through metaphor: ‘For the Lord your God is a devouring fire, a jealous God’ (Deuteronomy 4:24).²⁴⁵ This is without doubt a threatening image, alluding to the kind of destruction suffered by Sodom and Gomorrah in

²⁴³ For comments on the ubiquitous nature of pottery production in biblical cultures, see Borowski, *Daily Life*, 31; Isserlin, *Israelites*, 166.

²⁴⁴ Christopher Wright, *Deuteronomy*, New International Biblical Commentary (Carlisle: Paternoster Press/Peabody, MA: 1996), 50; 90.

²⁴⁵ Wright, *Deuteronomy*, 50.

Genesis 19, or the plague of thunder, fire, and hail in Egypt (Exodus 7:23-25). This image of consuming fire inspires a visceral fear of the Lord who has the power to destroy life entirely. Such a grand display reinforces the boundary not only of a holy place, but of a holy God.

For all this display of power and glory, the flames are kept in check. There are no accidental burnings. The fire does not spread beyond the mountain, the pillar, the bush. The restraining power God exercises over fire in these narratives provides a vibrant image of the self-limiting aspect of his communication with human beings through theophany. The infinite enters into the finite realm; his presence must be veiled and his holiness carefully demarcated, otherwise destruction may follow. As well as holiness, the restraint of fire hints at grace. The fire is contained so as not to harm Moses, who approaches it, or Israel, who gather before it. However, a transgression of the boundaries established for the encounter runs the risk (implicitly or explicitly) of the transgressor experiencing the unleashed force of the holy presence, just as the fire may be released to consume them.²⁴⁶ Moses must treat the ground near the burning bush as sacred; the congregation at Sinai must make themselves ritually clean for divine visitation.

The Lord's appearance in fire prevents Israel from discerning a definitive form in theophany.²⁴⁷ As a non-human, possibly formless manifestation of divine being, fire theophanies present a God who is other than human. While the biblical texts variously use gendered language to describe the characteristics of God — such as the masculine imagery of 'king' and, less often, the feminine imagery of 'mother' — the image of fire offers a genderless portrayal of divine reality.²⁴⁸ As God is beyond human, so also God is beyond human categories of gender. Although there remains the question of whether or not fire had any gender-specific associations in ancient Near Eastern cultures, no overt connections are made between fire and gender within the biblical texts. Simply through the association of

²⁴⁶ As in the example of Korah's rebellion, above.

²⁴⁷ For Deuteronomy's concern for the denial of form in the Horeb theophany, see Wright, *Deuteronomy*, 50.

²⁴⁸ Ryken et al., *Biblical Imagery*, s.v. "King, Kingship"; "Mother, Motherhood."

God with a non-human entity, biblical fire theophanies offer a reminder that divine reality is not restricted to anthropomorphic ways of being.²⁴⁹

Fire is a tool for theophany, and it is a descriptor for the presence seen in that theophany. God appears in fire, and God is *like* fire; yet the deity is not *composed* from fire.²⁵⁰ That God is beyond fire is made explicit in Elijah's encounter with the Lord at Horeb (1 Kings 19:11-18). This scene occurs immediately following the test at Mount Carmel, when God answers in fire to consume a sacrifice (1 Kings 18). The powerful manifestation at Horeb is, in form, an anti-theophany, which is to say that the usual characteristics of theophanic narratives are subverted.²⁵¹ Each phenomenon conventionally associated with divine appearance in the natural world (gale, earthquake, and fire on the mountain) is proclaimed empty: '...after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire' (1 Kings 19:12). This is particularly potent as the subversion of the prototypical theophanies of the Torah, especially those on the mountain (e.g. Exodus 19; Deuteronomy 5). The episode reveals that the God who may show himself through the forces of the natural world may just as easily reveal himself as separate from, and greater than, the clamour and confusion of the created world.²⁵²

3. Encountering God in the altar fire

Sacrifice by fire is an unfamiliar experience for most Christians in contemporary Britain. Burning offerings on an altar is not part of the Christian tradition, and the imagery of biblical sacrifice has received an uneasy reception in modern Christianity.²⁵³ The altar fire appears to be a place of destruction where 'perfect' and 'unblemished' animals are consumed to appease God (as, for example, the offerings commanded in Leviticus 22:21). Moreover, the sacrificial

²⁴⁹ Fire may be applied to aniconic or anthropomorphic imagery, depending on the passage. See Deena E. Grant, "Fire and the Body of Yahweh," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 40, no. 2 (2015): 139-140, accessed 1 March 2018, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0309089215621240>.

²⁵⁰ Niditch, *Religion*, 37.

²⁵¹ See Gina Hens-Piazza, *1-2 Kings*, Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006), 190.

²⁵² Niditch, *Religion*, 39.

²⁵³ Louis-Marie Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament: A sacramental reinterpretation of Christian existence*, trans. Patrick Madigan and Madeleine Beaumont (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1995), 290.

system of the Hebrew Bible is no longer necessary, argues the writer of Hebrews 10:1-18, rendered obsolete by Christ's sacrifice on the cross. The death and destruction involved in burnt offerings seem to be in conflict with the restoration and cleansing they are intended to achieve.²⁵⁴ Nevertheless, 'sacrificial metaphors have pervaded religious conceptions and secular rhetoric throughout the ages...'²⁵⁵ In their seminal volume on the topic, anthropologists Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss observe that the concept of sacrifice remains efficacious for Christian practice, but that the imagery operates on the 'moral' rather than 'physical' level; that is, Christ's redemptive sacrifice is considered to have a regenerative impact on the believer (especially in rituals such as the Catholic Mass) though no new physical sacrifice takes place.²⁵⁶ Removed by time and culture, and from the religious structures within which such sacrificial rites emerged, contemporary receivers of the Bible struggle to find a suitable theological context for the destructiveness of fire on the altar.

In contrast to contemporary Christian contexts, biblical cultures conducted much of their worship through sacrificial offerings.²⁵⁷ In Leviticus 6:13, the priests of Israel are instructed to keep the sacrificial fire stoked at all times: 'A perpetual fire shall be kept burning on the altar; it shall not go out.' The *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* captures the tendency of commentators to characterise the altar fire as a symbol of God's continuous presence.²⁵⁸ This supposition places heavy emphasis on the perpetual nature of the altar fire, since it follows that if the altar fire goes out, the presence of God goes with it. Porter supposes that the altar fire must not be extinguished because it is the same fire which 'came out from the Lord' to

²⁵⁴ Christian A. Eberhart, "Introduction: Sacrifice in the Bible," in *Ritual and Metaphor: Sacrifice in the Bible*, ed. Christian A. Eberhart (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011), xiv, accessed 4 April 2015, <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/heb.31351.0001.001>.

²⁵⁵ Eberhart, "Introduction," xiii.

²⁵⁶ Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss, *Sacrifice: Its Nature and Function*, trans. W. D. Halls (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), 93.

²⁵⁷ For an overview of types of sacrifice in ancient Hebrew worship, see Hubert and Mauss, *Sacrifice*, 16-18.

²⁵⁸ Ryken et al., *Biblical Imagery*, s.v. "fire."

consume the first offering from the altar in Leviticus 9:24.²⁵⁹ It is this divine origin, argues Morgenstern, which imbues the altar fire with purifying properties.²⁶⁰

The fact that Leviticus 6:8-13 is the only passage to make mention of this decree implies that commentators have overemphasised the importance of a perpetual fire for Israelite thought and practice. Unlike other transgressions relating to cultic practices (such as the unsolicited offerings made by Nadab and Abihu, described above), the Bible mentions no punishment when the altar fire is interrupted and later re-kindled by human hands.²⁶¹ Nevertheless, Leviticus 6:8-13 is emphatic: the priests should keep the altar fire sustained night and day. In so doing, the sacrificial flames would be a constant reminder of Israel's obligations under their covenantal relationship with God. In practical terms, kindling fire from scratch would have been time-consuming and impractical for frequent sacrifices.²⁶² It may be that the duration of burning a 'whole offering' took long enough that by the time one was consumed, it was time to prepare another. Continual fire was therefore a sign of Israelite devotion: that there should be an unending stream of sacrifices, necessitating a constant altar fire.²⁶³

One need not rely on the concept of a perpetual flame in order to find deep spiritual significance in the altar fire. A multivalent approach to the imagery of the altar fire reveals the reciprocity of biblical sacrifice as a form of divine-human interaction. The imagery of destruction, purification, transformation, and divine presence coalesced in this sensory act of communication between God and his people. An understanding of biblical sacrifice invites Christian practitioners to consider the embodied nature of sacramental experience, and the implications of fire as a sensory image of divine presence.

When Noah offers a burnt-offering after being delivered safely from the flood (Genesis 8:21), his offering foreshadows an act of worship that will later be firmly established in the

²⁵⁹ J. R. Porter, *Leviticus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 49.

²⁶⁰ Julian Morgenstern, *The Fire Upon the Altar* (Leiden: Brill, 1963), 54.

²⁶¹ The lament of Malachi 1:6-14 is a response neither to the human source of the altar fire nor the interruption of a divinely-kindled fire, but rather the offering of blemished animals.

²⁶² N. H. Snaith, ed., *Leviticus and Numbers*, The Century Bible (London: Nelson, 1967), 54.

²⁶³ Barch A. Levine, *Leviticus*, The JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia/New York/Jerusalem: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 36.

directives of the Torah.²⁶⁴ Balentine observes that in Noah's sacrifice, actions speak for themselves and prayer is absent.²⁶⁵ The burnt-offering is sufficient here, an appropriate communication between Noah and God. The 'pleasing odour' from the altar forms part of its efficacy, prompting a favourable response from the deity (Genesis 8:21-22).²⁶⁶

The involvement of fire in the ritual life and experience of Israel was deeply experiential. It was thoroughly *sensory*: from the smells of meat, smoke, and incense to the crackling heat and light of the sacrificial fire. In Leviticus 1:3-9, the offerer is instructed to draw close to the place of sacrifice and observe the priests as they prepare and burn the offering. For the Israelites making their offerings, the sights and smells of meat and grain on the fire may have been more readily associated with the life-sustaining task of preparing food each day. Awareness of these sensory dimensions lends the rites an immediacy that eludes readers encountering the process solely via the texts. Sacrifice could be celebratory, marking a festival or other joyous occasion; it was not necessarily arduous or unpleasant.²⁶⁷ Moreover, the cultic sacrificial system had an important role maintaining a distinctive Israelite identity over and above outsider influences.²⁶⁸ The centrality of sacrifice as an expression of the Israelite faith community is asserted throughout the wider biblical narrative, culminating with the 'sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord' at the presentation of Jesus at the temple (Luke 2:24), and the somewhat less detailed mention of the sacrificial lamb at the Passover festival (Mark 14:12-16 and parallels).

According to Leviticus 6:12, the offering placed on the altar must not only be submitted to the flames, but fully consumed. In biblical imagery, fire is associated with cleansing because of its ability to consume unwanted and potentially dangerous materials. Hence, the nature of this consumption may be one of 'refining' rather than 'destruction,' according to Dyrness.²⁶⁹ If this is the case, the burning rite may have an entirely different emphasis from

²⁶⁴ Balentine, *Vision*, 115.

²⁶⁵ Ibid.

²⁶⁶ Hubert and Mauss, *Sacrifice*, 36.

²⁶⁷ Eberhart, "Holy Smokes," 24.

²⁶⁸ Balentine, *Vision*, 175-177; cf. Hausner, *Spirits*, 14.

²⁶⁹ Dyrness, *Themes*, 154.

that of slaughter. Eberhart suggests that the efficacy of the burnt offering lies not in the sacrificial death of the animal, but in the act of burning.²⁷⁰ The selection of the offering, its preparation, and the ritual purity of the priest and the priestly utensils are all carefully defined constituents of the process; but its *culmination* is seen in the burning rite.²⁷¹ Ceremonial burning provides the common feature of the varying forms of sacrifice; it is the burning, rather than death, which converts the animal into a sacrificial offering.²⁷² The offering is ‘consecrated’ in the burning rite, so that the offering may become a viable means of mediation between ‘sacred’ and ‘profane.’²⁷³ In other words, fire becomes a mode by which humans may ritually interact with the divine: ‘Indeed, it is the burning rite that accomplishes the goal of biblical sacrifice — namely, communication with God.’²⁷⁴

The sacrificial process relies upon the transformative qualities of fire. Exodus and Leviticus use the language of transition to specify the presentation of the offering: the priest ‘shall turn it to smoke on the altar’ (Exodus 29:17f; Leviticus 1:1-17; 2:1-16; 3:5, etc.). Fire is uniquely able to transfer earth-bound, solid state matter to insubstantial, heaven-bound cloud of smoke and the smells of burning. Smoke naturally flows upwards, reflecting the heavenward direction of the ritual communication between worshipper and divinity.²⁷⁵ The fragrance is said to be received by God (Genesis 8:21; Exodus 2:41), confirming this directionality.²⁷⁶ Eberhart goes further: for him, the terminology used to describe aspects of sacrifice ‘conveys an approach or dynamic movement through sacred space that concludes in

²⁷⁰ Eberhart, “Holy Smokes,” 24.

²⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 24; 28.

²⁷² Christian A. Eberhart, “A Neglected Feature of Sacrifice in the Hebrew Bible: Remarks on the Burning Rite on the Altar,” *The Harvard Theological Review* 97, no. 4 (2004): 490, accessed 17 July 2015, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4495101>.

²⁷³ Hubert and Mauss, *Sacrifice*, 36; 97.

²⁷⁴ Eberhart, “Burning Rite,” 485.

²⁷⁵ Ryken et al., *Biblical Imagery*, s.v. “fire.”

²⁷⁶ This idea recurs in various places in the biblical texts. Leviticus and Numbers make repeated reference to offerings by fire as ‘a pleasing odour to the Lord,’ rendering it a formulaic phrase. Examples can be found in Leviticus 1:9-17; 2:1-12; 6:15-21, etc.; Numbers 15:1-24; 28:1-27; etc.

the burning rite on the altar.²⁷⁷ The consuming nature of fire transforms the offering so that it may be received by the divinity.²⁷⁸ Likewise, Hubert and Mauss observe that process of sacrifice also effects change in the offerer, whether morally, spiritually, or in terms of their ritual status.²⁷⁹ The transformational work of the fire on the altar thus mirrors, and enables, the transformation of the believer.

There is finality in the fire of sacrifice, since that which is burned cannot be unburned. The offering is transferred to the heavenly realm and no longer exists as the material object that was committed to the altar. This transformation of the sacrifice is at a cost to the offerer, who ‘deprives himself and gives’ in order that the rite may take place.²⁸⁰ The requirement for unblemished sacrifices means that the subjects suitable for an offering also possess fiscal value and are desirable for livestock, food, or trade. The altar fire cannot represent a disposal mechanism for the worst, most sickly produce.²⁸¹ The point is made in 2 Samuel 24:24 when David refuses to make a sacrifice using oxen offered to him for free: ‘No, but I will buy [the oxen] from you for a price; I will not offer burnt-offerings to the Lord my God that cost me nothing.’ To submit an offering to the flames is to surrender it entirely to God. Destruction by fire leads to real, material loss which befits the giving of a gift.²⁸² Moreover, it does not allow the sacrifice to be appropriated for human use after the ritual has concluded. With the exception of the designated portions allotted to the priests, the sacrifice is irrevocably burned up and the ashes taken away (Leviticus 6:11). The sensory and ephemeral nature of fire encapsulates both the imminence and transcendence of God as the appropriate offerings are transported to the heavenly realm.²⁸³

²⁷⁷ Eberhart, “Holy Smokes,” 28.

²⁷⁸ Eberhart, “Holy Smokes,” 29.

²⁷⁹ Hubert and Mauss, *Sacrifice*, 13.

²⁸⁰ Hubert and Mauss, *Sacrifice*, 100.

²⁸¹ Dyrness, *Themes*, 154.

²⁸² Niditch, *Religion*, 109.

²⁸³ Eberhart, “Holy Smokes,” 28-29.

4. Refining fire and visions of divine splendour

The prophetic tradition establishes fire from heaven as something which purifies and strengthens. An angel presents Isaiah with a burning coal from the sanctifying altar fire to cleanse his ‘unclean lips’ (Isaiah 6:4-7). God’s people are ‘put... into the fire’ to ‘refine them as one refines silver, and test them as gold is tested’ (Zechariah 13:9; cf. Isaiah 48:10). Here, the image of refining is used to account for the suffering of God’s people by comparing their experience to being ‘tested’ in a crucible, in which their stature as a people is not diminished but vastly improved. Archaeological evidence suggests that refining by fire was the only method of establishing the quality of raw materials and fashioning metal ore into useful objects.²⁸⁴ Fire was thus a method of ‘analysis’ through which metals were revealed and separated ready for the creation of something new.²⁸⁵

Like the altar fire, the refining process was one of transformation and purification through destruction. By appealing to the principles of metallurgy, prophetic imagery draws out the ability of fire to transform metal by removing lesser elements that weaken it. Impurities were removed through melting the substance in a furnace.²⁸⁶ The Lord is said to ‘be like a refiner’s fire’ in the way that he purifies his people (Malachi 3:2-4). Refining by fire thus implies wholeness, worth, and an absence of impurities.

The apocalyptic literature of the Hebrew Bible draws heavily on theophanic imagery.²⁸⁷ Heavenly beings, the heavenly throne, and parts of the divine being are all accorded some likeness to fire in the prophetic texts of Ezekiel, Daniel, and Isaiah. The theophanic vision of Ezekiel 1 describes ‘a great cloud with brightness around it and fire flashing forth continually, and in the middle of the fire, something like gleaming amber’ (Ezekiel 1:4). The vision reveals the appearance of the four living creatures (Ezekiel 1:14); and in the midst of the creatures, ‘something that looked like burning coals of fire, like torches moving to and

²⁸⁴ Deist, *Material Culture*, 211.

²⁸⁵ Rossotti, *Fire*, 159.

²⁸⁶ Deist, *Material Culture*, 211.

²⁸⁷ Margaret S. Odell, *Ezekiel*, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary 16 (Macon, Georgia: Smyth & Helwys, 2005), 18; 21.

fro... the fire was bright, and lightning issued from the fire' (Ezekiel 1:13). As in the theophanies of the patriarchs, God is present through holy fire.

The image of fiery torches recalls the flaming torch and smoking fire pot which pass through the pieces of Abraham's covenant sacrifice in Genesis 15. There, the movement of the torch and fire pot indicated divine initiative and covenant promise, against the background of a dark and portentous scene.²⁸⁸ Through the use of theophanic fire imagery, there is no doubt Ezekiel's vision involves the God of the covenant. Ezekiel, like Moses at the burning bush, hides his face when met by the fiery 'splendour' of God (Ezekiel 1:27-28; cf. Exodus 3:6).²⁸⁹ Fire — or more accurately, something that resembles fire — both surrounds and constitutes parts of the anthropomorphised divine being.²⁹⁰ While God's appearance is more human than animal, the electrum of his torso and the impression of fire below leave the reader in no doubt that this body is beyond human.²⁹¹ Likewise, Daniel uses imagery of fire and precious stones to convey a heavenly messenger with 'eyes like flaming torches' (Daniel 10:6).

Fire is applied to God so thoroughly in the prophecy of Isaiah 30 that even 'the breath of the Lord' and 'his tongue' are likened to a fire capable of destroying Israel's enemies (Isaiah 30:27; 33). The imagery surrounding breath, tongue, and lips may be linked to the Hebrew notion of a God whose word could create, sustain, and destroy.²⁹² Elsewhere, the breath of the Lord embodies God's creative power to give life (Genesis 2:7; Isaiah 42:5; Ezekiel 37:5-9); here, theophanic fire creates the conditions for righteous judgement.

²⁸⁸ Niditch, *Religion*, 36.

²⁸⁹ Dale F. Launderville, *Spirit and Reason: The Embodied Character of Ezekiel's Symbolic Thinking* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2007), 57.

²⁹⁰ Compare this description to depictions of the deity Ashur, whose 'power breaks forth in flames' in a similar manifestation; see Odell, *Ezekiel*, 30.

²⁹¹ Launderville, *Spirit*, 59.

²⁹² John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 1-39*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 566.

The prophetic texts of the Hebrew Bible identify fire closely with divine being, and not only as a tool for divine-human communication within the created order.²⁹³ These apocalyptic visions of divine splendour provide grand images of the Lord's capacity for judgement, his celestial otherness, and the cosmic scale and force of his actions. This apocalyptic fire imagery is taken forward in the eschatological writings of the New Testament.

5. Fire imagery in the New Testament

In contrast to Hebrew Bible theophanies, the immanent appearance of God in Christ is not given a fiery character. Although the Holy Spirit arrives in a fiery manifestation in Acts 2:1-4 (discussed below), there is a conspicuous absence of fire to describe Jesus during his ministry. The earthly life of Jesus is rarely connected with fire, except through teachings about eternal judgement. The Transfiguration touches on fire imagery when Matthew 7:2 compares Jesus' beatific face to the sun, but the aspect of the image drawn out is that of light, not fire. In Mark 9:43 and Luke 12:51, Jesus describes the 'unquenchable fire' for those unfit for salvation. Likewise, Matthew 13:40-42 declares that those who are unfaithful will be thrown 'into the furnace of fire' at the eschaton. These images of hellfire suggest destruction and intense suffering, or perhaps the 'purifying fire' of purgatory.²⁹⁴ Matthew 18:8-9 advises that this 'eternal fire' should be avoided at all costs.

In Luke 9:52-55, James and John assume that calling fire from heaven constitutes an appropriate punishment when Jesus is rejected by a Samaritan village. They are reprimanded, however — Jesus' ministry is characterised by other signs (Luke 9:5; John 3:2). Jesus aligns himself with fire in a single saying in Luke 12:49: 'I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!' Lauren F. Winner draws a parallel between this saying and the reaction of those disciples who meet Jesus on the road to Emmaus whose hearts 'burn' as he speaks with them (Luke 24:32).²⁹⁵ Drawing on Ambrose of Milan, Winner takes this verse as

²⁹³ Grant, "Body of Yahweh," 143.

²⁹⁴ Allison, et al., *Encyclopedia*. s.v. "fire."

²⁹⁵ Lauren F. Winner, *Wearing God* (New York: HarperOne, 2015), 205.

an image of faith and love for Christ which kindled in the hearts of his disciples.²⁹⁶ The attempt to make this saying of Jesus more palatable betrays a deep discomfort with the fire imagery of the passage. Winner's interpretation neglects the immediate literary context of the saying in Luke 12, which discloses how Jesus' ministry will produce conflict rather than peace (Luke 12:51).²⁹⁷ The saying reads more naturally as eschatological in nature, the fire a catalyst for a new phase in salvation history: perhaps bringing judgement, purification, or both.²⁹⁸

Just as the modern reader is not given reassurance in Genesis 1-2 that fire is part of a 'good' creation, so the Gospels lack the comfortable connotations of fire as a sign of divine presence. Jesus is associated with fire in the book of Revelation, however. Apocalyptic imagery envisions the risen Christ with blazing, otherworldly features (Revelation 1:9-20; 19:11-16). His description recalls the theophanic imagery of Daniel, Ezekiel, and Isaiah.²⁹⁹ In Revelation, the repeated ascription of 'eyes like a flame of fire' can be understood as characteristic of Jesus.³⁰⁰ Therefore, fire imagery creates a thread of continuity across several passages which use various names for Christ, including 'Son of Man,' 'Son of God,' and 'the Word of God' (Revelation 1:14; 2:18; 19:12, respectively).³⁰¹ In Revelation 1:14-15, the comparison between Christ's appearance and refined precious metal recalls the prophetic imagery of fire as a strengthening, purifying agent.

In this way, Revelation draws on established imagery from the wider biblical tradition. Like other prophetic texts, Revelation characterises fire 'as a means and symbol of refining judgement' in both the depiction of the risen Christ and the portrayal of his victory over

²⁹⁶ Winner, *Wearing God*, 205.

²⁹⁷ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke*, Sacra Pagina Series 3 (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1991), 207.

²⁹⁸ John Nolland, *Luke 1-9:20*, Word Biblical Commentary, Volume 35A (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000), 707.

²⁹⁹ Ian Boxall, *The Revelation of St John*, Black's New Testament Commentaries (London: Continuum, 2006), 41-42; 63; 164.

³⁰⁰ Boxall, *Revelation*, 273.

³⁰¹ Stephen S. Smalley, *The Revelation to John: A Commentary on the Greek Text of the Apocalypse* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2005), 489.

evil.³⁰² Fire from a heavenly altar is thrown upon the earth, followed by ‘hail and fire, mixed with blood’ which burns up a portion of the land (Revelation 8:3-7). The latter imagery evokes the hail and fire which constituted one of the plagues of Egypt (see Exodus 9:23-24) or the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah.³⁰³ In this eschatological conflict, the Lord has complete authority over fire which is only challenged, scandalously, by the beast and its prophet in Revelation 13.³⁰⁴ Heavenly authority is reestablished in a defeat which condemns the beast and its prophet to ‘a lake of fire that burns with sulphur’ which denotes the finality of their punishment.³⁰⁵

In addition to eschatological conflict and ultimate divine victory, certain New Testament texts predict the dissolution of the created order in fire (2 Peter 3; Revelation 8:1-5; 9:18). 2 Peter 3’s account of the earth dissolving in fire looks forward to the transformation and redemption of creation. The passage brings eschatological hope to the fore, basing its call for ethical living on hope for redemption rather than cultivating fear of the flames.³⁰⁶ The New Testament’s descriptions of judgement, heavenly authority, and cosmic renewal might suggest a wholly transcendent vision of human-divine interaction, restricted to ‘out of this world’ encounters with divine reality. The strong association between fire imagery and New Testament eschatology may be one reason the image of fire is met with uncertainty within Christian practice: fire evokes threatening and otherworldly connotations, and rarely seems to fit within a ‘positive’ theological category. This dominant impression of fire imagery is disrupted by the intimate and fiery touch of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

³⁰² Smalley, *Revelation*, 278.

³⁰³ For a detailed analysis of the imagery of this passage, see *ibid.*, 239-240.

³⁰⁴ W. Gordon Campbell, *Reading Revelation: A Thematic Approach* (Cambridge: James Clarke and Co., 2012), 91-92; 184.

³⁰⁵ Boxall, *Revelation*, 195.

³⁰⁶ Peter H. Davids, *The Letters of 2 Peter and Jude* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans/Nottingham: Apollos, 2006), 289.

The Holy Spirit at Pentecost

In Acts 2, the arrival of the Holy Spirit is described like fire sent from heaven: ‘suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind [...] Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them’ (Acts 2:2-3). The narrative portrays an intimate experience between the divine presence and the disciples as the Holy Spirit ‘rested on each of them’ in the form of supernatural flames (Acts 2:3). In the same way that fire from heaven signalled divine approval for the Lord’s prophets in the Hebrew Bible, the imagery of Pentecost conveys divine presence and empowerment (Acts 2:4).

The ambiguity in the description of ‘divided tongues, as of fire’ invites imaginative engagement and points to connections with other self-disclosures of God in the Bible. According to New Testament scholar Max Turner, Acts 2:1-13 intentionally alludes to the manifestation of God at Sinai.³⁰⁷ If so, the imagery does more than simply legitimise the phenomenon as a divine encounter. It also recalls the power of divine presence and action in the world. Biblical commentators have found the imagery perplexing, however. Although the manifestation of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost builds on conventional theophanic imagery, the particular configuration of fire found in Acts 2 is not prefigured in the Hebrew Bible. At Pentecost, the fire descends with no accompanying voice from within the flames (cf. Exodus 3:4; Deuteronomy 5:4). The fire does not mask God’s presence, as it does on the mountain (e.g. Deuteronomy 5:22). In fact, there is no mention of smoke shrouding the event, as one might expect from the precedents of God enveloping himself in smoke and fire at Sinai (as in Exodus 19:18).

In her commentary on Acts, Gaventa insists that there is nothing to do but wonder about the significance of the fiery tongues, aside from acknowledging wind and fire as ‘traditional signs of the divine.’³⁰⁸ I argue that the ‘divided tongues’ may be better read as distinctive signs of theophany which operate in their own right. The manifestation in Acts 2 is connected to the existing revelation of God through signs of theophany, but those signs (and especially fire) are at work in a new way. The fiery phenomenon at Pentecost heralds a new

³⁰⁷ Max Turner, *The Holy Spirit and Spiritual Gifts* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2009), 53.

³⁰⁸ Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Abingdon New Testament Commentaries (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 74.

epoch of human experience of the divine.³⁰⁹ Since the Lord is doing something new in this passage, it seems appropriate that some of the existing hallmarks of theophany should be used in a new way as well.

The theophany of Acts 2 is unique, in that it describes a theophanic fire that is not kept separate from God's people. There are no purity rites demanded of the disciples. The fire theophanies of the Hebrew Bible maintain a firm sense of physical boundary between human beings and the divine presence. In Acts 2, however, the physical and spiritual distance between God's presence and the disciples is dissolved. The disciples are not warned to keep their distance from the fire; on the contrary, they are touched by the flames. The result of this unprecedented intimacy is that they are 'filled with the Holy Spirit' (Acts 2:4), and a new connection between human and divine is forged through the fire.

In the narrative structure of Acts 2:1-4, the 'tongues' provide a mid-point between two occasions of filling: the house is 'filled' with theophanic wind, just as those gathered are 'filled' with the wind/Spirit of God.³¹⁰ The 'divided tongues' are from a single heavenly source, but rest on each person individually (Acts 2:3). Fire transforms what might be an otherwise impersonal experience filling the whole house into one that affirms the presence of the Spirit in each individual.

The fiery tongues in Acts do not consume. Like the flames of the burning bush, they provide an arresting image of God's dramatic yet self-limiting presence. Dunn surmises that, since these tongues are only *like* fire, the experience is one of receiving a vision rather than a physical, sensory experience.³¹¹ The account certainly narrates what those who were present *saw*, and it is true that comparisons to other sensory experiences of fire (heat, sound, smell) are not made. Other instances of biblical fire do not include sensory descriptions of heat or

³⁰⁹ Turner, *Holy Spirit*, 53.

³¹⁰ The wind filling the house is not the *pneuma* of the Spirit's appearance, but the parallelism links the wind of the Spirit with the wind of a more traditional theophany. Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans/Carlisle: Paternoster, 1998), 132.

³¹¹ James D. Dunn, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Epworth Commentaries (Peterborough: Epworth Press, 1996), 23.

sound or smell either; but this does not preclude them from contributing to ‘the sensual context’ of divine-human interaction.³¹² The burning bush of Exodus 3 is a prime example.

The comparison with fire might have easily evoked all kinds of sensory connotations for those whose daily life is infused with the heat, light, scents, and sound of moving flame. The mysterious account of Pentecost invites imaginative engagement with the multivalence of fire imagery and the sensory dimensions of fire. Approaching the image of fire beyond simple ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ associations opens up more hermeneutic possibilities for academics and deeper imaginative engagement for Christian communities. The theological ambiguity of the image of fire allows the reader to move beyond existing categories and encounter theological nuance in biblical fire imagery.

Chapter Conclusion

My analysis of fire in biblical texts illustrates the overlapping and variegated theological associations contained within biblical fire imagery. The multivalence found in biblical fire imagery should not be surprising given the nature of the Bible as a collection of ancient writings. Our understanding of the imagery has implications for some core doctrines of theology, especially in the interpretation of fire as a biblical image of divine reality. If the image of fire is oversimplified and reduced to binary categories, it follows that the understanding of the biblical God is restricted by an insufficient frame of reference.

In the imagery of fire from heaven, sacrifice, and theophany, earthly and heavenly reality meet in flame. The image of fire characterises the covenantal relationship between God and human beings. The image of fire is used to express divine power and shroud divine presence; delineate boundaries and sacred space; and facilitate communication through sacrifice and prophetic visions. As a core part of the Israelite sacrificial system, the burning rite affirmed community belonging and created a new spiritual reality for the offerer.³¹³ The ability of fire to bring about transformation makes it a fitting image for cleansing, sanctification, and spiritual refining. Transformation also occurs through the fiery presence of the Holy Spirit, whose arrival amongst the disciples initiates a new phase in salvation history. The touch of

³¹² Niditch, *Religion*, 37.

³¹³ Eberhart “Burning Rite,” 485; Balentine, *Vision*, 175-177.

fiery tongues is imminent and personal; and yet, like the transformed features of the apocalyptic Christ, not of this world. Fire is thus a complex and frequent image of divine revelation, through which aspects of God's character and the divine-human relationship are revealed.

The multivalence of biblical fire imagery exceeds binary categories altogether. Like fire itself, the image is ever shifting; like the God of the Bible, it refuses to be fully apprehended. It is only by understanding the multivalence of fire imagery through its cultural and religious context that the reader may access the theological depth of this imagery. Biblical fire imagery draws on many different elements of fire and frames them in the broader theological context of the Bible. As a result, each use of the image may offer a number of different meanings and associations.

Categorising aspects of fire in opposition to one another prevents appreciation for the complexity of fire as a biblical image, and limits the significance of fire in the theological imagination. While it may not sit well with contemporary sensibilities, fire as destruction need not always be skirted as an unpalatable image. The consuming nature of fire is necessary for its inclusion in biblical imagery of covenant, sanctification, and divine presence. In the same way, fire must burn up fuel to generate the heat, light, and kinetic energy which make it a necessary tool for human survival. Destruction is an intrinsic feature of fire, and cannot be separated from its more comfortable connotations of warmth, illumination, cleansing, and provision.

Fire offers a matrix of sensory experience through its heat, light, scent, sound, and smoke. All or part of this sensory experience may be highlighted in the biblical texts, or it may be left unexpressed. Where such details are not mentioned, the work of imagery means the sensations may be inferred through the audience's understanding of what it means to be near fire. Therefore, imaginative engagement with the sensory dimensions of the image relies on the audience's own encounters with fire. Theophanic fire was both similar to, and radically different from, the flames present in bakers' ovens, potters' kilns, at home, and on the altar. The text does not attempt to describe every point of similarity. The image simply evokes a range of senses and possibilities that refuse to be neatly defined.

For the people of ancient Israel and first-century Palestine, fire was present and vital. The intermingled and overlapping associations around fire emerged from a culture which placed

fire at the centre of domestic and religious life.³¹⁴ As an amenity necessary to survival, fire was a feature of home, industry, community, and warfare. The peoples of biblical cultures would have been well-versed in how to handle open flames. Within its range of biblical connotations it therefore carries associations drawn from domestic life, fire-related crafts and destruction, as well as more immediate characteristics of heat and light.

Recognising the full sensory range of fire introduces us to the immersive way in which experience of the divine may engage all the senses. However, such comprehensive engagement with the image may not be so readily available to the contemporary reader. In 21st century Britain, fire is no longer an indispensable part of daily life. Electricity dominates home and industry. Open fires are rare. Domestic fire tends to be carefully contained with safety measures to minimise its destructive potential. The decreased exposure to naked flames means that the sights, smells, sounds, and behaviour of fire are no longer so familiar. Given this altered relationship, one would expect the place of fire in the contemporary social imagination to be different from that of ancient Israel and first-century Palestine. Examining how the image of fire is constructed in 21st century British culture will demonstrate an additional layer of multivalence and begin to show how theological resonances of the image may be found beyond the biblical texts.

³¹⁴ Deist, *Material Culture*, 196; Eberhart, "Introduction," xiii.

Chapter 3: Contemporary encounters with fire

The multivalence of biblical fire imagery indicates that the image of fire has considerable theological potential. As Christianity's sacred text, the Bible can provide a useful resource for incorporating the image of fire into Christian practice. Yet it would be premature to immediately transpose these insights into a framework for engaging with the image of fire in contemporary Christian practice. Centuries of history separate the modern world from ancient Israel and first century Palestine, in addition to differences in language and culture. However, the most significant changes in the human experience of fire have taken place over the last two hundred years.³¹⁵ As such, this chapter will consider contemporary encounters with fire in view of modern technological and social change. In post-industrial British society, fire fulfils many of the same functions as it did in the ancient world; but the uses of fire for energy production, cooking, heating, and manufacture now take radically different forms, rendering 21st century fire all but unrecognisable when compared to its ancient ancestor.

In this chapter, I will place the image of fire within a 21st century British context. If we are to successfully contextualise the image of fire for Christian practice in contemporary Britain, we must first become orientated to factors which influence its construction in the wider social imagination. The 'social imagination' incorporates the dominant attitudes and associations which are shared by society, and by which images are constructed and interpreted.³¹⁶ These attitudes and associations regarding fire are shaped by the normative experiences of society as a whole. As such, the social imagination provides a layer of context which informs the presentation and reception of the image of fire, including its application in Christian practice.

It is not possible to present a full social history of fire in a single chapter. Other scholars have undertaken more exhaustive work to assess the environmental and social impact of fire in human society.³¹⁷ Of particular relevance to this research is Hazel Rossotti's study on fire,

³¹⁵ Pyne, *Nature and Culture*, 158-160.

³¹⁶ As defined in my introductory chapter.

³¹⁷ See the introduction for a critical overview of relevant literature.

which examines the various roles of fire from a British cultural perspective.³¹⁸ My own survey will draw on the existing body of research in order to provide a concise overview of fire in British society in the present day. I argue that, while biblical authors conceived the image of fire in relation to the physical presence of fire in ancient life, the contemporary British image of fire is largely constructed through its absence.

Pyne attributes fire's hiddenness in contemporary society to the need for its energy to be siphoned off and distributed to consumers.³¹⁹ The large-scale combustion of industry and infrastructure is largely hidden and strictly regulated. Power is generated and distributed in huge quantities through the wires and metal towers of the national grid.³²⁰ The absence of fire in contemporary daily life is particularly apparent in the home, where the technological and social changes of the 20th century saw the decline of the hearth as the focal point of the household's activities. Fire is no longer a familiar companion in the home or workplace.

Fire itself is often out of sight, but the threat of fire to personal and public safety is a continual source of concern in British society. Krell situates the destructiveness of fire in political unrest and loss of life: 'It has not been pretty, this century. And fire is everywhere implicated.'³²¹ Through fire prevention measures and media depictions, fire is associated with catastrophe, conflict, and destruction.

In view of the decline of fire in domestic spaces, Luis Fernández-Galiano contends that fire in the modern world is in the process of 'losing its ritual and mythical content,' with the result that '[t]he eloquent flames of bygone ages have become mute...'³²² However, it is more accurate to suggest that the emphases have shifted to highlight different nuances and fresh associations. Fire acquires various functions and forms depending upon its physical, social, and environmental setting. Demonstrably, fire 'takes its character from context.'³²³

³¹⁸ Rossotti, *Fire*, vi.

³¹⁹ Pyne, *Nature and Culture*, 159.

³²⁰ Ibid.

³²¹ Krell, *Burning Issues*, 185.

³²² Luis Fernández-Galiano, *Fire and Memory: On Architecture and Energy*, trans. Gina Cariño (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2000), 214.

³²³ Pyne, *Nature and Culture*, 13.

Only by acknowledging the multivalent qualities of fire in the social imagination will we be able to properly assess the image of fire for Christian practice.

In this chapter, I will argue that the hiddenness, necessity, and dangers of fire have engendered both fear and fascination in modern responses to fire. Fear and fascination thus provide the wider social context which underpins the image of fire in contemporary Christian practice.³²⁴ Firstly, I will examine how the decline of fire in domestic spaces has rendered fire an unfamiliar element for much of the British population. Secondly, I will consider how the continued necessity of fire in British industry and infrastructure has helped preserve the idea that fire is a source of energy, transformation, and cleansing. The third and final section of the chapter will explore how fear and fascination characterise contemporary encounters with fire. Fire poses danger to human society as a domestic hazard, environmental threat, and weapon of war; yet it is also used for recreation, relaxation, and social space. Despite the relative absence of fire in daily life, the image of fire thus remains strongly multivalent in the contemporary imagination.

1. Fire in decline

Bachelard observes that ‘fire is more a *social reality* than a *natural reality* [original emphasis].’³²⁵ He explains that it is our social environment, and not necessarily the characteristics of fire itself, which determine our attitude towards it. Pyne perceives a more reciprocal relationship between fire and human culture, in which each helps to determine the character of the other.³²⁶ In view of this connection between fire and society, the character of fire in the British imagination can be traced, in part, through the history of fire in the home. The availability of new fuels heralded radical changes in methods of heating and cooking in the modern era. During the 20th century, gas and paraffin overtook solid fuels (such as wood or coal) as the fuel of choice for domestic fires, including stoves and hearth fires.³²⁷

³²⁴ See Krell, *Burning Issues*, 17.

³²⁵ Bachelard, *Psychoanalysis*, 10.

³²⁶ Pyne, *World Fire*, 3-6; Pyne, *Nature and Culture*, 3.

³²⁷ Rossotti, *Fire*, 44.

Electricity, of course, was soon to follow, bringing new methods of domestic heating, lighting and cooking — in many cases, supplanting fire altogether.³²⁸

For the majority of contemporary British homes, the hearth is no longer the primary and combined source of heat, light and cooking. Cooking has been transferred from the fireplace to the purpose-built appliances of the kitchen. Gas cookers have outlasted the hearth as the mainstay of domestic fire, but its application of fire is more limited. Generally, the fire of a gas appliance is kept alight only as long as the heat is needed for cooking; it is rarely used exclusively to heat the room, although this is often concomitant. In the oven, the fire is shut away in a chamber; on the stove, the flame is localised to one or more of the rings. The flame is directed to cook the food and minimise loss of heat, and does not offer the same aesthetic component as the fire in the hearth.³²⁹

Even the use of fireplaces for heat — the function for which fireplaces are still regularly used — is no longer quite so crucial to daily life. Radiators, storage heaters and electric space heaters all provide cheaper and more convenient methods of heating.³³⁰ Open fireplaces are one option among many; traditional coal or wood hearths have become rarified, since the fuel is more difficult to acquire in comparison to the convenience of gas or electricity.³³¹ Fireplaces are no longer included as a standard feature in most homes. According to a 2015 report from Ofgem, the governmental energy regulator, around 93% of households in Great Britain use gas or electricity as their primary source of heating.³³²

Open fires also carry higher risk. Closed wood or coal fires offer greater efficiency, cleanliness and safety than open fires, but regular attention is required to kindle and tend the

³²⁸ Fernández-Galiano, *Fire and Memory*, 214.

³²⁹ *Ibid.*, 241.

³³⁰ Judy Attfield, “Bringing Modernity Home: Open Plan in the British Domestic Interior,” *At Home: An Anthropology of Domestic Space*, ed. Irene Cieraad (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2006), 73; 79.

³³¹ In certain remote areas, where mains gas and/or electricity are unavailable, other fuels may be more prevalent.

³³² Ofgem, “Insights paper on households with electric and other non-gas heating,” last modified 11 December 2015, <https://www.ofgem.gov.uk/ofgem-publications/98027/insightspaperonhouseholdswithelectricandothernon-gasheating-pdf>.

flames.³³³ In comparison, the fuel for gas fires is piped into the home and can be ignited, adjusted, and removed at will with minimal effort. Some gas fires are designed to suggest the appearance of coal and log fires, in which ‘the heater gives a plausible but unchanging imitation’ of a more traditional hearth.³³⁴ The constancy of the fuel in a gas fire renders its flame much more predictable, and the live flame is more controllable than that of a log fire. Electricity offers heat without the need for flames at all, eliminating the danger of flames spreading and unwanted smoke or gas in the air.

The decline of the hearth has meant a decline in the frequency and familiarity of fire in the home.³³⁵ Nevertheless, fascination with fire has persisted. Domestic fire is now a fashionable commodity in the form of wood burners and luxury fireplaces.³³⁶ Fascination with fire became particularly apparent in the new housing developments after the end of the Second World War. The insistence of council tenants to organise their furniture around the ‘artificial flames’ of electric fires perturbed interior designers, who envisioned a utilitarian seating arrangement away from the fireplace.³³⁷ For the designers, electric fires were to be used as functional appliances only, and not as a focus of domestic space.³³⁸ However, tenants continued to arrange the room around the electric fire even in homes with central heating.³³⁹ The electric fireplace — and, later, the television — became a stand-in for the hearth.³⁴⁰ In 1979, academic Peter Crown dubbed television ‘the electronic fireplace’ in an effort to

³³³ Rossotti, *Fire*, 43.

³³⁴ *Ibid.*, 44.

³³⁵ Fernández-Galiano, *Fire and Memory*, 214.

³³⁶ Wood burners are a popular choice for luxury indoor heating despite their detrimental effect on the environment. See Gary Fuller, “Pollutionwatch: log fires are cosy, but their days may be numbered,” *The Guardian*, 8 October 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2017/oct/08/pollutionwatch-log-fires-are-cosy-but-their-days-may-be-numbered>.

³³⁷ Attfield, “Modernity,” 80.

³³⁸ *Ibid.*, 79.

³³⁹ *Ibid.*, 80.

³⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

account for the way in which people would stare at the television as one might gaze into an open fire.³⁴¹

The nature of domestic fire, then, has changed considerably over the past century. The traditional open fireplace no longer characterises British domesticity. The locus of cooking and warmth has shifted to kitchen and heating appliances. Lighting is almost exclusively electric, except where candles offer an aesthetic alternative — or are needed to illumine the pitch dark of a power outage.³⁴² Even then, battery-operated torches are cheaply and easily available. Matches, lighters, and pilot lights offer almost instantaneous ignition on the occasions fire is required.

Since the direct experience of fire has become limited, education is one major way the contemporary British public encounter the wide-ranging utility of fire. Schools teach students how to heat chemicals with gas-fuelled flames through the use of bunsen burners — devices which demonstrate the role of oxygen visually through the transition from orange flame to blue. Bush craft courses teach traditional methods of woodland survival, and often include hands-on experiences of creating fire without the assistance of modern technology.³⁴³ At heritage museums, demonstrators showcase the equipment and skills necessary for traditional crafts to educate their audience, as well as satisfy their curiosity.

In just one example, the Black Country Living Museum in the West Midlands host an annual fire-themed event called ‘Red By Night.’ During the event, the public have an opportunity to ‘[s]ee the Museum transformed by steam and fire.’³⁴⁴ Practical demonstrations of traditional glass blowing and metalwork methods are accompanied by fire-themed performance art.³⁴⁵ The event pairs learning with entertainment, and emphasises the drama of live flames and the historic industries that used them. Fire, then, is

³⁴¹ Laurel Crone Sneed, “Mediatmosphere: Peter Crown: Tending TV's Fireplace,” *American Libraries* 10, no. 8 (1979): 492, accessed 27 February 2018, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25623821>.

³⁴² Pyne, *Nature and Culture*, 161.

³⁴³ For an example, see: “Bushcraft Fundamentals Course,” Woodland Ways, accessed 19 February 2018, <https://www.woodland-ways.co.uk/book-online-bushcraft-fundamentals-course-1.html>.

³⁴⁴ Black Country Living Museum, “Red By Night” promotional leaflet, accessed 12 May 2018, <http://www.bclm.co.uk/media/events/library/red-by-night.pdf>.

³⁴⁵ Black Country Living Museum, “Red by Night.”

incorporated into the purview of history and science: it is a curio to be encountered, its effects studied, its use to be conserved for posterity.

2. The necessity of fire

The applications of fire in contemporary British culture are, on their most basic level, consistent with the societal functions of fire throughout human history. Domestic heating, cooking, and social activities still employ fire in various forms, though the range of alternatives has grown considerably in recent decades. As in ancient Israel, contemporary Britain relies on combustion for manufacture and waste disposal. It is not so much that the basic *functions* of fire have changed, but the location and scale of such fires and the technologies that exploit them.³⁴⁶ Human beings have so increased their influence over fire in both urban and rural environments that '[f]ire has become dissociated from its ecological foundations' while simultaneously contributing to global ecological change.³⁴⁷ Scientific awareness surrounding climate, ecosystems, and the Earth's atmosphere has reinforced the environmental threat of fire within the British social imagination, sometimes as a matter of political or personal conscience.³⁴⁸ Industrial revolutions extend beyond socio-economic restructuring; they are revolutions of fire.³⁴⁹

The technological age has given rise to an insatiable demand for energy. Modern British industry could not operate without combustion and the energy it provides.³⁵⁰ Industrial-scale combustion is regulated and contained to the extent that it no longer 'look[s] like fire.'³⁵¹ Despite being vast in scale and application, industrial fire goes largely unobserved by the

³⁴⁶ Fernández-Galiano, *Fire and Memory*, 213-214.

³⁴⁷ Pyne, *Nature and Culture*, 159.

³⁴⁸ For a brief reflection on the (lack of) response to this issue from international governments despite its implications for the environmental agenda, see Krell, *Burning Issues*, 186-187.

³⁴⁹ Pyne, *Nature and Culture*, 159.

³⁵⁰ Fernández-Galiano, *Fire and Memory*, 22.

³⁵¹ Pyne, *Nature and Culture*, 174.

population.³⁵² Combustion powers the engine of modern society, turning it mostly from a distance.

Like the combustion of industry, fire for waste disposal provides a service for human convenience. Personal and industrial fires may be used to dispose of various kinds of materials — especially medical or other hazardous waste.³⁵³ Fumigation is used for cleansing sites affected by pests or disease.³⁵⁴ For soil where burning has occurred, the regenerative aspect of fire replenishes nutrients and promotes new growth.³⁵⁵ However, large-scale disposal of animal matter by fire can produce an unpleasant impression of death and destruction. In 2001, there were over 950 separate sites in which animal carcasses were burned in response to the Foot and Mouth Disease outbreak in the United Kingdom.³⁵⁶ The burning of animals was met with unease at home and abroad, ‘with visitors to Britain and the countryside deterred by the [...] media images of mass pyres.’³⁵⁷ Krell’s observation for times of war applies just as well to these circumstances: ‘First fire destroys, shockingly, and then it is employed to cleanse.’³⁵⁸

The funerary rites of cremation locate the association of fire with death, disposal, and cleansing in a ceremonial context.³⁵⁹ The fire of cremation exists quite literally beyond the veil, disposed of in a hidden and sanitised manner. Cremation is a closed process: closed because the fire and the body are closed off from sight (and the other senses) of the mourners; and because the gathering is usually confined to the select few relatives, friends,

³⁵² Pyne, *Nature and Culture*, 174.

³⁵³ Rossotti, *Fire*, 77.

³⁵⁴ “Disease Control in Flowers and Shrubs,” Department for Environment, Food, and Rural Affairs, last modified 13 June 2013, <https://www.gov.uk/disease-control-in-flowers-and-shrubs>.

³⁵⁵ Rossotti, *Fire*, 229-230.

³⁵⁶ Paul Watkiss and Alison Smith, “CBA of Foot and Mouth Disease Control Strategies: Environmental Impacts,” DEFRA, accessed 9 February 2015, http://archive.defra.gov.uk/foodfarm/farmanimal/diseases/atoz/fmd/documents/environmental_report.pdf.

³⁵⁷ National Audit Office, “The 2001 Outbreak of Foot and Mouth Disease,” 21 June 2002, <http://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2002/06/0102939.pdf>.

³⁵⁸ Krell, *Burning Issues*, 35.

³⁵⁹ Rossotti, *Fire*, 76-77.

and personal contacts of the deceased. The ceremony, while intimate, is organised around a distant fire. Fire's work — to consume the body, flesh, and bone — is left vague and undefined. Cremation ceremonies do not usually feature a contemplation of how the body is charred, blackened, peeled and consumed by the flames. Fire, like death, constitutes a mysterious transfiguration from one state to another.

3. Fear and fascination

i. Fire as threat

As we have seen thus far, in much of contemporary Britain fire is now largely absent. However, out of sight does not always mean out of mind. In her volume on the cultural reception of fire, Rossotti begins with a simple observation: 'Fire fascinates.'³⁶⁰ Fascination with fire seems to be innately human.³⁶¹ Yet from the moment the dangers of fire are understood, the human experience of fire is also defined by fear.³⁶² The combination of fear and fascination of fire is reflected and reinforced in British art, literature, and the media. In the social imagination, fire represents an existential threat that exceeds mere physical destruction. There is a social, emotional, and spiritual dimension to the risks posed by fire. Visual and literary depictions of hell as a 'glowing and molten landscape' have forged a lasting association between fire and eternal suffering.³⁶³ In works such as Dante's *Inferno*, the symbolism of hellfire is artistically sophisticated and theologically complex.³⁶⁴ The nuances of religious imagery are not always perceived by modern audiences, however. Anxiety

³⁶⁰ Rossotti, *Fire*, 3.

³⁶¹ Robert G. Vreeland and Bernard M. Levin, "Psychological Aspects of Firesetting," in *Fires and Human Behaviour*, ed. David Canter (London/New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1980), 37.

³⁶² Bachelard, *Psychoanalysis*, 11. Bachelard's reflections are somewhat dated for the modern reader, but the respective roles of social prohibitions and direct experience ('fire play') for children have been identified in modern psychology. See Ditsa Kafry, "Playing with Matches: Children and Fire," in *Fires and Human Behaviour*, ed. David Canter (London/New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1980), 47-61.

³⁶³ Dale C. Allison, Jr. et al., eds., *Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Reception*, Vol. 11 (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2015), s.v. "hell," accessed 10 May 2018, <https://doi.org/10.1515/ebr.hell>.

³⁶⁴ Joseph Pequigney, "Incontinence," *Dante Encyclopedia*, ed. Richard Lansing, (London/New York: Routledge/Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2010), 509-510, <https://www.dawsonera.com/readonline/9780203834473>. 'Incontinence' refers to a category of sin.

regarding the existential implications of fire is woven throughout the classic British film *The Wicker Man* (1973), in which the ritual use of fire is portrayed as alien and sinister.³⁶⁵

There is no question that uncontrolled fire represents a serious threat to human lives. In workplaces and other public buildings, fire is continuously acknowledged through concern for its prevention. Fire safety standards require certain products to be manufactured with fire prevention in mind, especially upholstery (which can catch fire easily).³⁶⁶ Fire management strategies aim to prevent loss of life and property using safety guidelines, instructions, and equipment to be used to prevent and extinguish unwanted fires.³⁶⁷ Cigarettes and matches pose a high risk in the ignition of accidental fires.³⁶⁸ As a result, signs prohibiting naked flames or cigarettes are a familiar part of the British visual lexicon. Where this signage is displayed, the British public are reminded that fire and smoking are dangerous and undesirable. Safety information, fire alarms, and extinguishers are ubiquitous in hotel rooms, schools, workplaces, and public buildings. In this way, fire is made present in the social imagination through its very absence.

The limited use of open flames and the rise of fire prevention measures mean that large-scale urban fire is now much rarer than in previous generations.³⁶⁹ Considerable research has been conducted in aid of reducing the probability of fire getting out of control, so that the characteristics of urban conflagrations have actually changed over time. As Pyne notes, 'There are fewer opportunities for fire to start, fewer chances for it to spread, and fewer occasions where fire can overpower attempts to suppress it.'³⁷⁰ Severe urban fires now occur not in the form of widespread blazes sweeping through large areas of a town or city, but in

³⁶⁵ Krell, *Burning Issues*, 90.

³⁶⁶ E. Guillaume, C. Chivas and A. Sainrat, *Regulatory Issues and Flame Retardant Usage in Upholstered Furniture in Europe* (Trappes, France: LNE-CEMATE - Fire Behaviour Division, 2000), 39, accessed 10 February 2015, <http://www.see.ed.ac.uk/FIRESEAT/files08/04-Guillaume.pdf>.

³⁶⁷ Pyne, *Nature and Culture*, 72.

³⁶⁸ Guillaume et al., *Regulatory Issues*, 39.

³⁶⁹ Pyne, *Nature and Culture*, 72.

³⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 73.

concentrated burning of crowded buildings — such as Grenfell Tower in London.³⁷¹ Media coverage of major fires provide minute-by-minute dissections of the devastation, bringing the reality of fire's destructive capacity to those who may never witness such a conflagration in person.³⁷²

In rural areas, widespread fires still present a considerable a risk in the modern era. Wildfires are experienced on a much smaller scale in Britain than in hotter climates due to the country's temperate environmental conditions.³⁷³ However, when they do occur, British wildfires take a substantial ecological and economic toll through damage to habitats, farmland, and property.³⁷⁴ In Scotland, several significant wildfires burned across heathland in high summer temperatures during 2018, including a wildfire at Arthur's Seat in Edinburgh.³⁷⁵ Due to the tendency of fire to spread quickly, hikers and campers are urged to act responsibly when dealing with any fire or source of ignition.³⁷⁶ A fire can spontaneously reignite after it has been extinguished, making it an unpredictable foe.³⁷⁷ Fire represents 'a fight to be fought, an engagement to be won.'³⁷⁸ Those trained to tackle uncontrolled fires are 'firefighters' who, like combatants, engage their enemy at great personal risk.³⁷⁹ Even though the nature and extent of fire has changed during recent history, unwanted fire

³⁷¹ Pyne, *Nature and Culture*, 73.

³⁷² See, for example, "What happened at Grenfell Tower? A visual guide," *The Guardian*, 14 June 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/jun/14/what-happened-at-grenfell-tower-london-fire-visual-guide>.

³⁷³ Krell, *Burning Issues*, 18-19.

³⁷⁴ "Forest Fires and Climate Change," Forestry Commission, accessed 23 January 2015, <http://www.forestry.gov.uk/fr/inf-d-7wlahk>.

³⁷⁵ "Fire crews continue to battle three large wildfires in the Highlands," BBC News, 28 May 2018, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-highlands-islands-44272790>. See also: "Arthur's Seat blaze amid wildfire warning," BBC News, 21 May 2018, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-44188555>.

³⁷⁶ "Help Prevent Forest Fires," Forestry Commission, accessed 23 January 2015, <http://www.forestry.gov.uk/forestry/INFD-8SUH7Z>.

³⁷⁷ As in the case of the wildfire at Arthur's Seat, Edinburgh, in May 2018.

³⁷⁸ Charles Clisby, "Experiencing Fires," in *Fires and Human Behaviour*, ed. David Canter (London/New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1980), 325.

³⁷⁹ Jensen, *Ancient Fire*, 14-15.

continues to cause physical, psychological, and emotional devastation for the individuals and communities affected by the destruction of life and property.³⁸⁰

ii. Warfare, violence, and memorialisation

Fire is not merely a natural enemy; it is an ally in war. Since recent British conflicts have largely been fought overseas, the devastation of fire in warfare is usually seen from a distance through media portrayals. Hence, the fire of war is an unfamiliar fire to many; but its *image* is prevalent in political and social consciousness nevertheless. Fire is dramatic: the flames and their consequences makes for dramatic photographs, exciting film sequences, and horrifying news reports. Documentaries and historical sources contain dramatic and sometimes difficult examples of fire in major world conflicts, from air raids to burned bodies. Nick Ut's famous photograph, 'The Terror of War,' depicts Vietnamese children fleeing a napalm attack during the Vietnam War. Ut's photograph continues to provide a provocative reminder of the horrors inflicted by these large-scale incendiary attacks over forty years on.³⁸¹

For the British public, terrorism has brought incendiary warfare much closer to home. Car bombs, petrol bombs, and suicide attacks have all been used for large-scale destruction and high-profile political statement, from the sectarian conflicts in Northern Ireland to the London '7/7' attacks of 2005.³⁸² The power of fire to evoke terror speaks to society's fear of its effects, and its high degree of visibility. The destruction of (symbolic) objects or property with fire can be used as a form of political protest. Burning an effigy of a person, a national flag, or books constitutes 'an easy and dramatic means of public demonstration of religious,

³⁸⁰ Rossotti, *Fire*, 183.

³⁸¹ Tiffany Hagler-Geard, "The Historic 'Napalm Girl' Pulitzer Image Marks Its 40th Anniversary," 8 June 2012, <http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/headlines/2012/06/the-historic-napalm-girl-pulitzer-image-marks-its-40th-anniversary>.

³⁸² The association between bonfires and sectarian violence is an important factor in Northern Irish community fire practices. See Jack Santino, "Light up the Sky: Halloween Bonfires and Cultural Hegemony in Northern Ireland," *Western Folklore* 55, no. 3 (1996): 213, accessed 23 March 2015, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1500482>. The relationship between the image of fire and community context is considered in Chapter 4.

political or moral outrage.³⁸³ When used in this way, fire imagery is infused with social and political meaning.

Fire is used to bring death and destruction, but it is also used as a symbol of respect for lives lost. In Liverpool, an eternal flame burns in tribute to the victims of the Hillsborough Disaster of 1996. For Bachelard, candlelight calls to mind the fragility of human life in the vulnerability of the candle flame.³⁸⁴ In contrast, the flame lit in honour of the Hillsborough victims forms a symbol of enduring memorialisation. The memorial flame is handled as a sacred object. In 2015, when the memorial site at Anfield Stadium was closed for renovation, the flame was temporarily transferred to Liverpool Anglican Cathedral. It was housed in the cathedral's Memorial Chapel for 18 months, where it remained available to the public as an ongoing symbol of remembrance.³⁸⁵ It is a testament to the symbolic magnitude of the flame that it was not simply put into storage with the rest of the Anfield memorial, but relocated to ensure that members of the local community did not lose access to the undying memorial encompassed by the flame.

Each year a beacon is lit in a brazier atop a major war memorial in Dundee, Scotland, in remembrance of the severe loss of life suffered at the Battle of Loos in the First World War. The carvings on the granite memorial situate the flame alongside imagery of 'hope and new life.'³⁸⁶ The beacon articulates a cycle in which the fire — and all it represents — is never permanently extinguished. These moments of memorialisation suggest that fire has a spiritual dimension for the community who light the flame. The memorial fire relates to life and death, and perhaps even life *after* death — within the collective memory if not in a specific doctrine of the afterlife. Although fire instills fear in its potential to bring destruction

³⁸³ Rossotti, *Fire*, 244.

³⁸⁴ Bachelard, *Flame*, 16.

³⁸⁵ "Hillsborough eternal flame resides in our Memorial Chapel," Liverpool Cathedral, last modified 7 January 2015, http://www.liverpoolcathedral.org.uk/43/section.aspx/37/hillsborough_eternal_flame_resides_in_our_memorial_chapel.

³⁸⁶ Steven Brocklehurst, "The Battle of Loos: How Dundee marks its 'black day'," BBC News, 25 September 2015, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-34289582>.

and threaten human existence, it still has the power to elicit fascination in the way it seems to mimic life, constantly animated until the moment it is extinguished.³⁸⁷

iii. Fire for recreation, relaxation and social space

As with any tool, fire is defined as much by how it is used as by its intrinsic characteristics. While the necessity of combustion for human survival relies on fire's inherent destructiveness, the use of fire for recreation, relaxation, and the creation of social space reveals its aesthetic role in contemporary life. Traditional forms of fire still garner interest despite being rendered obsolete by modern methods. Courses in glass blowing, glazing and firing ceramics, blacksmithing, silversmithing, and candle-making are available across the UK.³⁸⁸ These traditional crafts call attention to the creative capacity of fire and provide unusual hobbies.

Historical re-enactors may forgo modern forms of ignition, such as lighters and matches, as they recreate former ways of life.³⁸⁹ Kindling fire from scratch is a delicate, time-consuming process which introduces the kindler to the fine balance of fuel, oxygen, and heat which must be nurtured for the fire to catch successfully. One must provide the correct conditions for combustion through physical interaction with the heat and fuel, and perhaps even share oxygen by imparting one's own breath to feed the embers. In these recreational practices, there is a physical connection between the fire and the person kindling the flames. A demonstration of a traditional kindling process is available in the appendix.³⁹⁰

The aesthetic and sensory value of fire is prized above efficiency when an open hearth is lit, since modern heating appliances offer more efficient ways to heat a room.³⁹¹ Rossotti notes the aesthetic value of an open hearth and the atmosphere, or presence, generated by

³⁸⁷ Charteris-Black, *Fire Metaphors*, 7-8.

³⁸⁸ Directories for such courses can be found easily online.

³⁸⁹ The specialist company 'Flint & Steel' offer historically-accurate 'fire kits' composed of flint, steel, kindling, and a tinderbox via their website, <http://www.flint-and-steel.com>.

³⁹⁰ See photograph in Appendix 6.3. Footage of the author kindling fire from scratch is available in Appendix 6.6.

³⁹¹ As noted in the first section of this chapter.

the fire.³⁹² Coexisting with electric lights, live flame from fireplaces and indoor wood burners can provide a dimmer ‘mood’ lighting. The flickering of the flames produces light in motion, an unsteady and aesthetically appealing feature of the open fire that ‘invites reverie.’³⁹³ Bachelard wrote extensively about the relationship between fire and reverie, characterising fire as the foremost ‘symbol of repose.’³⁹⁴ For Bachelard, the creative potential of fire occurs not only through its ability to generate energy, but through its capacity to inspire human creativity.³⁹⁵

In certain circumstances, contemporary encounters with fire can also generate a social atmosphere. Campfires traditionally provide occasions for socialising, cooking, and storytelling, but have become less popular in Britain due to the availability of safer and more efficient camping stoves.³⁹⁶ Meanwhile, fire pits have become a popular choice for kindling fire in the garden.³⁹⁷ They are safer than a campfire because the fire is contained: either in a shallow pit dug into the ground (lined with brick or stone to insulate the fire); or a metal bowl or container which keeps the fire away from flammable objects. Fire pits generate a similar atmosphere to hearth fires in that they offer an aesthetically appealing source of light and warmth. At night, these fires transform a dark outdoor space into a potential site of entertainment and social activity.³⁹⁸

Traditional conventions surrounding gender roles have also been subverted over outdoor flames: while women may have been considered chief occupiers of the kitchen, men have often received outdoor cooking as their own domain.³⁹⁹ Building, lighting, and cooking on an outdoor fire has conventionally been characterised as a masculine activity in western culture.

³⁹² Rossotti, *Fire*, 44.

³⁹³ Krell, *Burning Issues*, 7.

³⁹⁴ Bachelard, *Psychoanalysis*, 14.

³⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁹⁶ Rossotti, *Fire*, 73.

³⁹⁷ For photographic illustration, see Appendices 6.1 and 6.2

³⁹⁸ Appendix 6.5 illustrates the attractive glow of a fire pit illuminating an outdoor space.

³⁹⁹ Kristin L. Matthews, “One Nation Over Coals: Cold War Nationalism and the Barbecue,” *American Studies* 50, no. 3/4 (2009): 7, accessed 22 November 2017, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41287749>.

In the 1950s, the image of a wealthy, suburban, white man sizzling steaks on the barbecue was sold as the very picture of American masculinity.⁴⁰⁰ In *The Psychoanalysis of Fire*, French philosopher Bachelard recounts his father's mastery over the family hearth fire, asserting control over both the element and domestic space.⁴⁰¹ The image of fire is considered appropriate to the expression of masculinity because it is seen to carry masculine characteristics. *The Complete Dictionary of Symbols in Myth, Art and Literature* characterises fire as 'a masculine and active element' which embodies 'spiritual ardour, trial, ambition, inspiration, [and] sexual passion' amongst other vigorous qualities.⁴⁰² British historian Callum Brown agrees, describing fire as an image of 'supreme masculinity.'⁴⁰³

As a masculinised image — that is, an otherwise genderless phenomenon endowed with 'masculine' traits — the image of fire is utilised for discourse relating to power, authority, physical aggression, romantic and sexual desire, and overwhelming emotions (which often spill over into action).⁴⁰⁴ The connection with masculinity is enhanced in outdoor fires, which evoke concepts of survival and dominance over nature.⁴⁰⁵ Fire and fire imagery thus provide a conduit for reinforcing the masculine credentials of those engaged in an activity which might otherwise be considered 'feminine,' such as cooking.⁴⁰⁶

Social context helps determine the significance of fire in any given space. The associations attributed to a particular experience of fire are subject to change over time. The British tradition of 'Bonfire Night' (or Guy Fawkes Night) provides a pertinent example. Historically, Guy Fawkes Night was a state-sanctioned celebration of the arrest and execution

⁴⁰⁰ Matthews, "One Nation," 8.

⁴⁰¹ Bachelard, *Psychoanalysis*, 8-9. See also Bachelard's psychosexual analysis of fire as an embodiment of male agency and potency (ibid., 49).

⁴⁰² Jack Tresidder, ed., *The Complete Dictionary of Symbols in Myth, Art and Literature* (London: Duncan Baird, 2004), s.v. "Fire, Flame."

⁴⁰³ Callum Brown, *Up-helly-aa: Custom, Culture and Community in Shetland* (Manchester: Mandolin, 1998), 17.

⁴⁰⁴ Charteris-Black, *Fire Metaphors*, 3.

⁴⁰⁵ Ibid., 7.

⁴⁰⁶ Julie M. Parsons, *Gender, Class and Food: Families, Bodies and Health* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 153.

of Guy Fawkes for his involvement in the 1605 Gunpowder Plot.⁴⁰⁷ The Guy Fawkes Night bonfire is notable both in its longevity and in its recontextualisation over time. An event which was once suffused with an anti-Catholic, pro-Parliament political agenda has now been neutralised in much of British culture to become a night of frivolity.⁴⁰⁸ While traditional celebrations included the burning of an effigy of Guy Fawkes, known as the ‘guy,’ many Guy Fawkes Night bonfires are now held without any involvement of the guy at all.⁴⁰⁹ Bonfires ‘light up the sky’ in a particularly visible and often very public manner, and are used as a means of private and community celebration.⁴¹⁰ Bonfires feature in a variety of traditional folk rituals across Britain and Northern Ireland, each attributing their own set of meanings to the act of ceremonial burning.⁴¹¹ The multivalence of bonfire imagery will be examined further in the following chapter.

The enjoyment of fire for relaxation and social space is widely recognised in British culture, but some individuals may have little direct experience of fire for recreational purposes. With the decline of fire in British domestic spaces, the means to create fire is not readily available to everyone. In most 21st century homes, a working hearth is an optional extra and, as such, a mark of affluence.⁴¹² Traditional crafts and historical re-enactment often involve financial investment to pay for tutelage, materials, and specialist equipment. Digital media offers an alternative means of encountering the image of fire. Pre-recorded videos and

⁴⁰⁷ Christina Hole, “Winter Bonfires,” *Folklore* 71, no. 4 (1960): 218, accessed 31 March 2015, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1258110>.

⁴⁰⁸ Hole, “Winter Bonfires,” 220.

⁴⁰⁹ Lewes, in East Sussex, provides a notable exception. Its extravagant commemoration of Guy Fawkes’ Night, and the deaths of 17 Protestant martyrs, is marked by burning ‘Enemies of the Bonfire.’ As well as effigies of Guy Fawkes and Pope Paul V, these usually involve political figures set in tableau by whichever bonfire society is responsible for the festivities that year. For more information, see <http://www.lewesbonfire.co.uk>.

⁴¹⁰ Santino, “Light up the Sky,” 213; Hole, “Winter Bonfires,” 217-227.

⁴¹¹ For a concise overview of some such examples, see Hole, “Winter Bonfires,” 217-227.

⁴¹² The design and placement of the fireplace has long been used as a mark of affluence. See Alexander Fenton, *The Hearth in Scotland* (Edinburgh: National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland, 1981), 24; 36.

computer-generated simulations of fire are accessible to anyone with a DVD player or an internet connection.⁴¹³

For Krell, the digital simulation of fire erases the reality of fire as combustion, as ‘culture simply obliterates nature.’⁴¹⁴ Digital fireplaces mimic the visual and aural presence of fire in the home even though fire itself is absent. Certain video games offer a virtual experience of kindling a fire, and even cooking over flames, but cannot produce real heat.⁴¹⁵ Yet digital technologies give much more intimate access to combustion than would be possible otherwise. Digital magnification and slow motion effects can capture the movement of individual flames at a level of detail that would not be possible with the naked eye. Popular-level science videos entertain and educate audiences by demonstrating experiments with fire, achieving combustive chemical reactions, jets of coloured flame, and vigorous explosions.⁴¹⁶

Simulations and video footage cannot produce all of the sensory experience of fire, but they do allow creative interaction with the image of fire without physical risk. The internet has broadened the ability of individuals to experience specialised uses of fire, as people share footage of fire festivals and creative fire performances from around the world.⁴¹⁷ Artists who use fire to create artworks and new creative technologies use images and videos to share their techniques on websites and social media.⁴¹⁸ One such video features the making of a ‘pyroboard,’ an audio visualiser in which sound waves are made visible through combusting

⁴¹³ Pyne, *Nature and Culture*, 162. For an example of a simulated fireplace, see: Virtual Fireplace, “Burning Fireplace with Crackling Fire Sounds (Full HD),” YouTube video, 2:00:00, 30 September 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0fYL_qiDYf0.

⁴¹⁴ Krell, *Burning Issues*, 189.

⁴¹⁵ The computer game *Pixel Fireplace* (Hex-Ray Studios, 2012), for example, allows the player to build a fire, toast marshmallows, and douse the flames using keyboard commands.

⁴¹⁶ For example: “Slo Mo Rainbow Flame,” *The Slo Mo Guys*, video, 6:11, accessed 25 May 2018, <https://roosterteeth.com/episode/the-slow-mo-guys-season-1-slow-mo-rainbow-flame>.

⁴¹⁷ Including the Stonehaven Fireball Ceremony, Beltane Fire Festival, and Up-Helly-Aa; see Chapter 5.

⁴¹⁸ The artist Steve Spazuk, for example, uses fire to create his paintings. He demonstrates his technique, called ‘fumage,’ on his website: “Spazuk,” accessed 30 May 2018, <https://www.spazuk.com>.

gas.⁴¹⁹ Digital media has, therefore, made the creative dimension of fire more accessible in a society where the threat of fire is usually emphasised. Contrary to Krell's critique, the existence of digital fire does not obliterate nature, but emulates it. Though the physical experience of fire has declined over recent decades, human fascination with fire has remained.

Chapter Conclusion

This concise critical summary has offered a broad understanding of the character of contemporary British encounters with fire. This opening movement of the thesis has orientated us to the multivalence of the image of fire, which is informed by the multiplicitous roles of fire in human society. If human interaction with fire is so changeable on the pragmatic level of lived experience, then social interaction with the *image* of fire must follow the same variable pattern. This accounts for both the diversity and the continuity which occurs between biblical fire imagery and the image of fire in the contemporary British imagination.

For both biblical and contemporary culture, fire is used to create objects and produce energy. Industry depends upon the creative capacity of fire, but for contemporary Britain the ways in which that capacity is exploited are often physically distant.⁴²⁰ Combustion permeates the fabric of contemporary society, but it does so at a remove from daily experience.⁴²¹ The people of ancient Israel and first-century Palestine would have engaged with the creativity of fire much more directly through their craftsmanship for home and trade. All of this might be taken to work towards Fernández-Galiano's presupposition that fire has been robbed of its symbolic depth. In the sense of fire as familial and necessary, this may be true. However, Fernández-Galiano fails to account for the evocative connotations fire still possesses within the post-industrial social imagination. Anxiety, unfamiliarity, fascination, and romanticism all constitute mutually reinforcing structures within

⁴¹⁹ Christopher Jobson, "Pyro Board: An Audio Visualizer Created from an Array of 2,500 Flames," *Colossal*, 17 April 2014, <http://www.thisiscolossal.com/2014/04/pyro-board-an-audio-visualizer-created-with-an-array-of-2500-flames>.

⁴²⁰ Fernández-Galiano, *Fire and Memory*, 18.

⁴²¹ *Ibid.*, 214.

contemporary British society. Traditional forms of fire are preserved as nostalgic emblems of the past. The creative capacity of fire becomes clear in its use by re-enactors, educators, and in digital media, as well as its potential to generate social space.

Entwined, paradoxically but indivisibly, with fire's potential for creativity is its destructive potential. Although fire may be deliberately employed for its capacity for 'constructive destruction,' the catastrophic potential of fire stands as a reminder that it is a natural force in the human domain.⁴²² The ways in which this force is managed speaks volumes about the assumptions and aspirations surrounding human interaction with it. In the biblical narrative, natural forces are presented as part of the finite order existing under divine control, as in Psalm 104.⁴²³ Meanwhile, secular British society tends not to interpret such events theologically, but emphasises the dangers of fire when it moves out of human control and into senseless destruction. Warnings, safety equipment, and advice on tackling unwanted fires are ubiquitous, betraying a deep social anxiety over the destructive power of the flame, and continually calling to mind the potential threat of fire even in its absence.

Fire is understood as a force to be controlled for human purposes from its ignition until it is extinguished. Meanwhile, fire outside human influence is conceived as inherently threatening to human and natural environments. Fire is a non-human presence in human spaces. It is present in sound, smell, light, warmth, and even taste (for example, in the taste of smoked, barbecued, or roasted food).⁴²⁴ Its aesthetic appeal is manifest in the fascination fire elicits, its potential to evoke reverie, and the atmosphere it can generate. Despite modern safety concerns, enchantment with the aesthetics of fire have preserved its dual identity within the British social imagination. The experiential and 'atmospheric' capabilities of fire introduce an imaginative space within which interactions with fire may occur beyond the baldly pragmatic. Indeed, defining the function of domestic fire merely in terms of its practical applications of heating, lighting, and cooking is reductionist at best. Since its aesthetic nature has contributed to its preservation and romanticisation in the home, its

⁴²² Rossotti, *Fire*, 97.

⁴²³ J. C. L. Gibson, *Language and Imagery in the Old Testament* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1998), 129.

⁴²⁴ A barbecue has the potential to evoke all senses at once. For the distinctive sounds and appearance of barbecue coals burning, see Appendix 6.7.

aesthetic and imaginative value should not be overlooked in the study of fire in British culture.

In Chapter 2, I argued that the complexity of human encounters with fire underpins the theological dimensions of the image. For most of human history, people have seen first-hand how fire embodies the apparently conflicting categories of creation and destruction, safety and risk. The human response to fire is complex: one may be fascinated by the destructive power of fire even as one is afraid of it. In the biblical imagery of sacrifice, purification, and refining, the creative and destructive capacities of fire function as interdependent qualities of the same process.⁴²⁵ I argue that the multivalence of fire imagery reflects the multifaceted nature of fire, the experience of which is heightened in the liminal space of community rituals. As my critical observations in the following chapters will show, applications of fire in specific community contexts challenge a simple dualistic structure.⁴²⁶

Unlike in ancient Israel, however, fire rites are not woven into the fabric of British social and religious structures. If Christians are no longer inhabiting a world suffused by fire and fire imagery, in what ways can the image of fire speak to Christian thought and practice? This question will guide our analysis throughout the second movement of the thesis as we turn to consider how the image of fire is used to convey meaning and identity in contemporary community contexts.

⁴²⁵ See Chapter 2.

⁴²⁶ This is particularly evident in the Paralympic Closing Ceremony and Beltane Fire Festival; see Chapters 4 and 5, respectively.

Second movement: Observation

Chapters 4 & 5

Community encounters with fire

Ritual encounters with fire

Chapter 4: Community encounters with fire

Having established the multivalence of fire imagery in biblical texts and the British social imagination, I have indicated the considerable theological and imaginative potential which exists in contemporary encounters with fire. In the second movement of the thesis, I will conduct critical observation and analysis of selected contemporary fire practices to explore how the multivalence of fire is interpreted within certain community and ritual contexts. The multivalence of fire imagery reveals a complex relationship between imagery and social context. It is this relationship which shapes the presentation and reception of fire imagery within a particular community. In this chapter, I argue that community context informs the interpretation of fire imagery and allows for the exploration of the image's multivalence within a shared frame of reference. As such, it is possible for a community to interpret fire imagery in creative — and even subversive — ways. Hence, applications of fire imagery can 'go against the grain' of the established associations within a given setting.

The first section of this chapter will consider the fire imagery of David Best's *Temple* (Londonderry/Derry, 2015), a memorial installation burned as performance art. My analysis of *Temple* will explore a subversion of traditional functions and symbolism surrounding the bonfire in its Northern Irish socio-political context, illustrating that the image of fire need not be limited to conventional interpretations. On the contrary, communities may adapt established uses of fire and fire imagery for their own practices.

If a single application of fire (such as the bonfire) can contain such broad interpretive potential, communities seeking to utilise the multivalence of fire imagery are faced with a dilemma. How can individuals make sense of fire imagery when it is presented in numerous or apparently conflicting forms? In the second part of this chapter, I will examine the multiplicity of fire imagery utilised by the sporting community of the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games. The Olympic and Paralympic ceremonies use fire imagery as emblems of community values or identity. The emblem of the Olympic and Paralympic Games — the Olympic/Paralympic Flame — is subject to varied symbolic readings thanks to the different approaches of the various Olympic and Paralympic ceremonies.

The 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games built on the multivalence of the Flame image by applying a multiplicity of fire imagery throughout their ceremonies. In this section, I will explore how meaning is communicated through fire imagery which is by turns complementary, competing, and apparently contradictory. Context will prove just as important here as in the example of David Best's *Temple*. Using the examples in this chapter, I will demonstrate that the image of fire can be continually applied and re-applied in response to the needs of the community. The situational nature of the image of fire makes it a viable candidate for adapting to a Christian community context.

Section 1: Multivalence and subversion in David Best's *Temple*

David Best's *Temple* was a memorial installation created and subsequently burned in 2015 as a community art project.⁴²⁷ The project was conceived within the socio-political context of Londonderry/Derry, and consciously situated within a long history of politically-charged bonfires in Northern Ireland. The city of Londonderry/Derry has a particularly painful past of internal religious strife, and shares in the Northern Irish feeling that bonfires are volatile acts of community demarcation and division. Brenda Stevenson, the mayor of Londonderry/Derry, expressed it succinctly for the media: 'For us, bonfires are associated with history, violence and the Troubles.'⁴²⁸

In Northern Ireland, the term 'Bonfire Night' is usually synonymous with the Eleventh Night bonfire celebrations. Eleventh Night commemorates the Protestant/loyalist victory at the Battle of the Boyne on Twelfth Night (12 July) in 1690. The battle was reputedly preceded by bonfires — beacons, by which William of Orange navigated on the night before his successful and bloody battle. Hence, the celebratory bonfires are lit on the eve of Twelfth

⁴²⁷ For photos of the installation and burning, see: David Sim, "David Best's Temple, a tribute to peace in Northern Ireland, is burned in spectacular bonfire [Photos]," *International Business Times*, 23 March 2015, <https://www.ibtimes.co.uk/david-bests-temple-tribute-peace-northern-ireland-burned-spectacular-bonfire-photos-1493121>.

⁴²⁸ Quoted in Katrin Bennhold, "Healing Fire in Londonderry: The Temple Was Built to Burn," *New York Times*, 27 March 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/28/world/europe/using-flames-to-soothe-a-northern-ireland-city-scarred-by-fire.html>.

Night, on 11 July.⁴²⁹ The overtones of that violence remain strong, reinforced each year by the Protestant/loyalist community's use of fire imagery. The bonfires are often mountainous in scale, usually built from discarded pallets and tyres.⁴³⁰ Tokens of outsider communities, whether Catholic or minority ethnic groups, are customarily submitted to the flames as a deliberate display of exclusion.⁴³¹ Burning effigies and tokens representing outsider groups expresses the desire for their removal through a symbolic display of destruction.⁴³² This symbolic act is one of 'differentiation,' delineating the group's identity in resistance to those perceived as outsiders.⁴³³

In contrast to the Guy Fawkes Night bonfires (see Chapter 3), time has not tempered the exclusion and sublimated violence imbued in the Eleventh Night fires. As symbols of war and separation, the bonfires have helped keep sectarian tensions close to the surface.⁴³⁴ Participants continue to recreate feelings of bitterness and violence toward outsider groups while affirming their own identities as the in-group. Identity construction takes on traditionally masculine forms of aggression and risk-taking, expressed through interactions with the bonfire.⁴³⁵ The fires hold such potency within Northern Irish culture that local authorities have struggled to regulate them.⁴³⁶

Artichoke, the production company behind *Temple*, commissioned artist David Best to address precisely these associations of violence, commenting: '*Temple* offers a new take on the

⁴²⁹ Jamie McDowell, "The boy and the bonfire," *Belfast Telegraph*, 9 July 2010, <http://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/life/features/the-boy-and-the-bonfire-28546607.html>.

⁴³⁰ McDowell, "Boy."

⁴³¹ Rebecca Black, "Loyalists urged not to burn Pope effigies on Eleventh night bonfires," *Belfast Telegraph*, 2 July 2014, <http://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/loyalists-urged-not-to-burn-pope-effigies-on-eleventh-night-bonfires-30399910.html>.

⁴³² Rossotti, *Fire*, 244.

⁴³³ Hausner, *Spirits*, 14.

⁴³⁴ Black, "Loyalists."

⁴³⁵ Compare Callum Brown's description of masculine behaviour in Brown, *Up-helly-aa*, 17; 29.

⁴³⁶ "Eleventh Night bonfires: 'Exceptionally busy' for firefighters," *BBC News*, 12 July 2017, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-40578886>; Black, "Loyalists."

bonfire tradition, creating a shared space that welcomes everyone.’⁴³⁷ Best earned his notoriety through *Burning Man*, the annual fire festival currently held in Nevada. At *Burning Man* bonfires, wooden temples, and the colossal effigy of ‘The Man’ are set alight as an embodiment of ‘radical inclusion [...], radical self-reliance, radical self-expression, [and] communal effort,’ amongst other interpretations.⁴³⁸ The director of Artichoke, Helen Marriage, perceived a strong contrast between the culture of bonfires in Northern Ireland and *Burning Man*. In describing the conception of *Temple*, she noted ‘how there is a completely different set of values [in the Northern Irish bonfire tradition versus *Burning Man*], where the atmosphere is different and the intention is different.’⁴³⁹

Under Best’s direction, *Temple* was constructed piece by piece through the involvement of around 100 local people.⁴⁴⁰ *Temple* was constructed on Bards Hill, which had previously been treated as nationalist space and considered out of bounds to loyalists.⁴⁴¹ However, *Temple* offered an unequivocal invitation to all members of the community, regardless of political or religious affiliation. To quote the artist: ‘The temple was for everyone to use as they wanted, for healing, celebration and commemoration.’⁴⁴² Both sides of the conflict were represented in the commemorative messages, prayers, and objects left in the temple prior to its burning. The items submitted for burning were offered as part of personal reflection and memorialisation, and *not* as signs of exclusion — a direct contrast to Eleventh Night bonfire practices. According to Marriage, *Temple* ‘was about taking the bonfire tradition and subverting it.’⁴⁴³ Deaths were memorialised, but not ritually enacted through the fire. The

⁴³⁷ Fiona Audley, “Thousands watch as Derry temple burns to the ground,” *The Irish Post*, 23 March 2015, <http://www.irishpost.co.uk/news/thousands-watch-as-derry-temple-burns-to-the-ground>.

⁴³⁸ ‘The 10 Principles’ of *Burning Man* are listed in the official website (<http://burningman.org>).

⁴³⁹ Fiona Audley, “Derry temple will go up in flames in Burning Man style arts project,” *The Irish Post*, 20 February 2015, <http://www.irishpost.co.uk/news/derry-temple-will-go-flames-burning-man-style-arts-project>.

⁴⁴⁰ Audley, “Arts project.”

⁴⁴¹ Nuala McCann, “Artist David Best on burning his Londonderry temple,” BBC News, 20 March 2015, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-31986595>.

⁴⁴² Audley, “Thousands watch.”

⁴⁴³ McCann, “Artist David Best.”

aim and atmosphere of letting go of the past stood in direct opposition to the way bonfires are usually used to perpetuate sectarian divisions in Northern Ireland.

The official footage of the burning, just shy of two minutes long — omitting much of the approximated 20 minutes of actual burning — records whistles and cheers from the 15,000 strong crowd as the temple went up in flames.⁴⁴⁴ During the film, the hilltop spectacle is shown to be visible across some distance, giving the impression of a blazing beacon whose light extended across different parts of the city. For those gathered at the site, the burning was experienced in more than just the light of the flames. Footage of the event shows the fire, crackling and swirling in the wind, illuminating the temple from within and gradually engulfing the structure.⁴⁴⁵ Smoke billows from the burn. Eventually, the fire dies down enough to reveal the skeleton of the temple, before the spire is slaked down to the ground by the flames. The remainder of the frame disintegrates slowly into a pile of flaming timber. The *Temple* structure had a digital counterpart built within the game ‘Minecraft’ by artist Adam Clarke.⁴⁴⁶ The project was commissioned by Artichoke and allowed Minecraft players to participate in the event regardless of geographical location.⁴⁴⁷ Members of the digital community were able to leave their own notes and tokens within the virtual *Temple*, which was ‘burned’ on the 21st March 2015 — the same date as the physical structure.⁴⁴⁸

By design, *Temple* drew heavily on the multivalence of the image of fire. The uses of fire for both memorialisation and destruction came together, providing space for both ‘remembrance and forgetting.’⁴⁴⁹ The fire consumed — and destroyed — the structure, but not mindlessly or meaninglessly: the burning was carefully directed, and a culmination of the

⁴⁴⁴ Footage viewed on the *Temple* project website, since removed: “Temple,” Artichoke Trust, accessed 27 February 2017, <http://templederry-londonderry.com>.

⁴⁴⁵ Artichoke Trust, “Temple: A Radical Arts Project in Derry~Londonderry,” YouTube video, 12:26, 19 May 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SfqdLyI3Mgo>.

⁴⁴⁶ Blockworks, “TempleCraft - Minecraft Timelapse,” YouTube video, 1:38, 18 March 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V8pbCxCOqqE>.

⁴⁴⁷ “Minecraft Timelapse.”

⁴⁴⁸ YouTube user rsmalec, “Templecraft Burns (Minecraft Server Event),” YouTube video, 17:27, 23 March 2015, <https://youtu.be/otyhX57Goxk?t=13m34s>.

⁴⁴⁹ “David Best,” Artichoke Trust, accessed 27 February 2017, <http://templederry-londonderry.com/about/david-best>.

entire event. One news report remarked: ‘Everything about this project leads to the final burning.’⁴⁵⁰ While some noted that it would be ‘a shame’ to lose such a beautiful structure, the loss reflects the individual and communal losses experienced in the city.⁴⁵¹ The beauty of the structure elicited emotional investment in more than the abstract desire for unity. Its aesthetic value generated investment in a tangible structure, so that the loss of that structure embodied emotional loss. To some degree, the event offered a rehabilitation of the notion of fire as destroyer of the beautiful, by infusing both the destruction and the aesthetics of the temple with a joint significance and purpose. The timber structure of the temple was invested with careful design, craftsmanship, and personal messages and mementos, all offered by the community which would give the art its context. And from its context was drawn *Temple*’s personal significance to those involved in its construction, commemorative use as an installation, and final burning. Like the sacrificial burnt offerings of Israelite worship, *Temple* only gained its full significance through its destruction by fire.⁴⁵²

Best conceives the burning of his temple artworks and their contents to offer protection to those ceremonially surrendering relics of the past. A memorial, he observes, is a place of permanence where things remain; the burning temples offer a different kind of permanence — that of destruction and, in some sense, preservation through absence.⁴⁵³ Reminders of painful or traumatic events are taken away; names of abusers consumed; identities of lost loved ones commemorated.⁴⁵⁴ Items cannot be dislocated through accidents or the passage of time, or traded for commercial gain that undermines and ignores their sentimental significance. Through this protection, Best construes his temples to form sacred space.⁴⁵⁵ In

⁴⁵⁰ McCann, “Artist David Best.”

⁴⁵¹ Ibid.

⁴⁵² Hubert and Mauss, *Sacrifice*, 35; see Chapter 2 (section 3).

⁴⁵³ Geoff Dyer, “David Best: the man who builds art – and burns it,” *The Guardian*, 15 February 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/feb/15/david-best-the-man-who-builds-art-and-burns-it-burning-man-derry>.

⁴⁵⁴ Dyer, “David Best.”

⁴⁵⁵ Ibid.

Temple, fire offered cleansing by removing signs of grief, loss, pain and death from both sides of the political divide.⁴⁵⁶

The indiscriminate way fire burns renders it non-partisan, a crucial feature in setting the stage for reconciliation. Helen Marriage describes ‘the cathartic moment of when [the temple is] burnt and the hopes for the future that have been embedded in the structure disappear into the night sky.’⁴⁵⁷ The possibility of leaving the past to the flames and thus becoming free to step into a reality cleansed from those bonds allows Best to understand fire as an image which ‘represents forgiveness and celebration.’⁴⁵⁸

David Best’s *Temple* not only demonstrates the possibility for fire imagery to be applied and interpreted multivalently. The project also indicates the potential of fire imagery to offer a way to engage with theological themes: in this case, questions of life, death, suffering, and reconciliation. In direct contrast to the established Eleventh Night tradition, *Temple* incorporated opportunities to explore forgiveness, cleansing, transfiguration, and hope in the face of pain and loss. Although the temple structure was not presented as a place of worship, its function as a memorial and place of quiet reflection made spiritual engagement a legitimate part of the ceremonial experience. The idea of laying things to rest, or offering them to destruction — figuratively, putting them to death — in the hope of new life resonates strongly with the Christian narrative. The symbolic resonances of the burning provide imaginative space with the potential to be *sacral* imaginative space.

My study of *Temple* offers a useful guide for the possibilities and limitations of the multivalence of the image of fire. First, the multivalent aspect of fire imagery does not merely give rise to a range of possible interpretations. Instead, the image of fire has the capacity to present numerous ideas simultaneously. Second, social and political context forms the framework within which fire imagery operates. The community’s traditions,

⁴⁵⁶ For further analysis of *Temple* as memorial, see Margo Shea, “Troubling Heritage: Intimate Pasts and Public Memories at Derry/Londonderry’s ‘Temple,’” in *Emotion, Affective Practices, and the Past in the Present*, ed. Laurajane Smith, Margaret Wetherell, Gary Campbell (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018), 39-55.

⁴⁵⁷ Audley, “Arts project.”

⁴⁵⁸ “Burning of Temple in Londonderry takes place,” BBC News, 22 March 2015, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-32002102>.

suppositions, and shared frames of reference determine their reception of the fire imagery at play. As with all social practices, community encounters with fire are subject to context and reception.⁴⁵⁹

As this section has shown, however, it is possible for communities to apply the image of fire in ways which transgress established meanings and associations of its imagery. This is possible through the multivalence of the image of fire, which is constructed within the imagination in reference to contextual cues as well as pre-existing associations. The ceremonial context of *Temple* allowed the community to explore alternative meanings of bonfire imagery, and in doing so subverted the established bonfire tradition.

Given the social context of Northern Irish bonfires, certain readings of the image necessarily stand in opposition to one another. Multivalence has its limits. A single bonfire can only be sectarian *or* unifying; it cannot be both at once. It can aim to provide space for forgiveness *or* violence; not both. The effigy or token submitted to the flames speaks either of letting go, or of reinforcing exclusion of 'outsider' groups. The fire imagery may be interpreted differently by each individual, but their cultural, social, and religious context may influence the primary associations that are derived from the image.

Temple formed a single instance of fire in conversation with an established bonfire tradition. In the following section, I will consider how multiple instances of fire imagery extend the multivalent potential of the image of fire in a given setting. Through examination of the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Ceremonies in London, I will show that multiple applications of fire imagery need not always cohere to a consistent meaning even when they are presented within the same imaginative setting. The ceremonies of London 2012 offer examples of an international community re-presenting and re-applying the image of fire through a multiplicity of fire imagery, with different interpretations of fire often arising simultaneously.

⁴⁵⁹ Taylor, *Social Imaginaries*, 23.

2. Fire imagery at the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Ceremonies

The Olympic and Paralympic Games are world-class competitive sporting events, staged for an international audience. The quadrennial Summer Olympic and Paralympic Games enjoy a particularly high profile, attracting participants and spectators from scores of nations.⁴⁶⁰ From 27 July to 12 August 2012, Great Britain hosted the Summer Olympic Games in London. The Summer Paralympic Games followed, running from 29 August until 9 September 2012. Both Games took place at the Olympic Park in east London and are collectively referred to as 'London 2012.' The sporting events and associated ceremonial celebrations of London 2012 were broadcast live to audiences around the world.⁴⁶¹

The Olympic and Paralympic ceremonies provide a platform by which the host nation may showcase aspects of their own culture(s), effectively re-contextualising the perceived Olympic values through each performance. The Games are themselves located within a wider context of the Olympic and Paralympic Movements, and their organisational emphases on human achievement, sportsmanship, and a coming together of a global community.⁴⁶² The imagery and artistic performances of each ceremony are unique to each host nation. Each ceremony within the Games also offers its own presentation of the core organisational imagery, often focused on the Olympic and Paralympic Flame.

The Olympics and Paralympics share a number of common features. For each Olympic and Paralympic Games held, there are three primary ceremonial events. These are: (1) *Lighting Ceremony and Torch Relay*; (2) *Opening Ceremony*; (3) *Closing Ceremony*. Below, I will analyse the fire imagery of each ceremony in turn, beginning with the Olympics and followed

⁴⁶⁰ "London 2012," International Olympic Committee, accessed 23 April 2017, <https://www.olympic.org/london-2012> ('All Facts' tab).

⁴⁶¹ "London 2012."

⁴⁶² "What we do," International Olympic Committee, accessed 6 October 2016, <https://www.olympic.org/the-ioc/what-we-do>; "The IPC - Who we are," Paralympic Movement, accessed 6 October 2016, <https://www.paralympic.org/the-ipc/about-us>.

by the Paralympics. My observations and analysis are based on the recorded footage, including live commentaries, as well as written primary and secondary sources.⁴⁶³

The 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games were marked by customarily extravagant Opening and Closing Ceremonies, involving music acts, performance art, pyrotechnics, and the overarching drama of the Flame emblem. The Flame's journey gives narrative structure to the Olympic and Paralympic ceremonies by defining when the Games begin and when they end. From the moment these ceremonial Flames are ignited for the torch relay to the moment the cauldron is finally extinguished, fire provides a constant, otherworldly presence.

The Flame forms a continuous symbolic backdrop to the various activities of the athletes, volunteers, dignitaries and performers. The Flame's presence is personified, infused with meaning, and taken to represent 'the spirit of the Games.'⁴⁶⁴ Since the official literature resists strict delineation of the Flame image, the Olympics and Paralympics provide an image that invites imaginative engagement. The Flame emblem is never fully defined, but the symbol is read in the context of the Games as a whole. Olympic and Paralympic ideals are conveyed through the image of the Flame through its status as the community emblem.

During London 2012, fire was presented as a mysterious force which sacralises, enlightens, destroys, and creates. Notably, the 2012 Paralympic ceremonies were saturated with fire imagery far beyond the scope of the Paralympic Flame itself. The Paralympic Opening Ceremony used fire to illustrate the creative energy of the universe, and the Paralympic torch became a metaphor for enlightenment and the human spirit. The Paralympic Closing Ceremony went further, continually playing with the metaphoric and symbolic possibilities of the image of fire — generating open-ended narratives and symbols through a celebratory approach to fire's multivalence.

The analysis of these ceremonies will demonstrate how a single, defined image of fire — in this case, the Olympic and Paralympic Flame — may be applied in different ways and with

⁴⁶³ Olympic ceremonies and commentary referenced using official livestream footage. Olympic Channel, "The Complete London 2012 Opening Ceremony | London 2012 Olympic Games," YouTube video, 3:59:49, 27 July 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4As0e4de-rI>. Paralympic ceremonies and commentary referenced from: *London 2012 Paralympic Games* (London: Channel 4 DVD, 2012), DVD.

⁴⁶⁴ Author's transcription of live commentary from the Paralympic Opening Ceremony.

different emphases through community and ceremonial context.⁴⁶⁵ The ideas and connotations attributed to the Flame emblem during London 2012 were continually in flux. This points to fire as a dynamic image which may be continually re-applied in the same (or similar) settings to evoke fresh meaning. Examining the multiplicity of fire imagery in the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic ceremonies will also show how a variety of supplementary fire images may operate alongside a central fire symbol. Rather than being in competition with the Flame, the fire imagery of the ceremonies' artistic performances enriched the imaginative landscape and deepened engagement with the image. This was especially true of the Paralympic Opening and Closing Ceremonies, which expressed a number of ways fire can be envisioned within the British social imagination: as an image of threat, transcendence, creativity, enlightenment, and rebirth.

London 2012: Olympic Games

Olympic Ceremony (1): Olympic Lighting Ceremony & Torch Relay

Some weeks prior to the commencement of the Summer Olympic Games, the Olympic Flame is lit in a dedicated lighting ceremony.⁴⁶⁶ This lighting ceremony constructs a narrative concerning the origin, character, and purpose of the Flame. The lighting ceremony thus establishes a number of symbolic resonances with which the Flame will be associated for the rest of the Games. The Olympic Games lighting ceremony conveys the creation of a single flame, captured from the sun, which takes on Olympic organisational values specifically and the idea of human virtue in general.⁴⁶⁷ According to official sources, the lighting ceremony 'is choreographed to look as timeless as the values of peace, unity and friendship it symbolises.'⁴⁶⁸

⁴⁶⁵ Since the Olympic and Paralympic ceremonies were staged as live performances, I will use present tense to describe the acts as they unfolded.

⁴⁶⁶ Footage can be viewed online: "The Olympic Flame begins its journey," International Olympic Committee, accessed 5 May 2018, <https://www.olympic.org/videos/the-olympic-flame-begins-its-journey>.

⁴⁶⁷ Sarah Edworthy, *The Olympic Torch Relay: Follow the Flame of London — An Official London 2012 Games Publication* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2012), 8.

⁴⁶⁸ Edworthy, *Torch Relay*, 8.

The Olympic Flame lighting ceremony has become enshrined in a set of modern Olympic traditions which draw their aesthetic inspiration from ancient Greek culture. The lighting ceremony is staged at the ruins of an ancient Greek temple in Olympia, Greece.⁴⁶⁹ There, a 'sacred flame' is lit by using a parabolic mirror to focus the sun's rays.⁴⁷⁰ With the sun as the source, affirms the IOC, '[t]he purity of the flame is guaranteed.'⁴⁷¹ The ceremony emulates the ancient Greek custom of using a curved mirror known as a *skaphia* to kindle flames for ritual purposes.⁴⁷² As well as the conception of an ageless and sacred eternal flame, the emphasis on an historic link suggests a desire to legitimate the Olympic Movement through the perceived authority of classical culture.⁴⁷³

Despite the classical stylings of the lighting ceremony and torch relay, the ceremonial aspects of the modern Olympic Games are overwhelmingly contemporary innovations.⁴⁷⁴ The Olympic Flame was first introduced in the 1928 Olympics in Amsterdam.⁴⁷⁵ It was even later, in the proud ceremonials of the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games, that the Olympic lighting ceremony and torch relay were first staged. The Olympic lighting ceremony and torch relay were conceived by Carl Diem, who was a key figure in the German Organising Committee, and have become part and parcel of 'the invented tradition of the modern Olympic Games.'⁴⁷⁶ As one might expect from a German Organising Committee under Hitler, these 1936 ceremonies were heavily influenced by Nazi ideology.⁴⁷⁷ In particular, the desire for a 'pure' Olympic Flame has troubling implications when viewed in line with the political

⁴⁶⁹ John Grasso, Bill Mallon, and Jeroen Heijmans, *Historical Dictionary of the Olympic Movement* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 436.

⁴⁷⁰ International Olympic Committee (IOC), "Factsheet — The Olympic Torch Relay," 1, 16 June 2014, http://www.olympic.org/Documents/Reference_documents_Factsheets/The_Olympic_Torch_relay.pdf.

⁴⁷¹ IOC, "Factsheet," 1.

⁴⁷² Ibid.

⁴⁷³ Ibid.

⁴⁷⁴ David Clay Large, *Nazi Games: The Olympics of 1936* (New York/London: WW Norton & Company, 2007), 4.

⁴⁷⁵ Grasso, Mallon, and Heijmans, *Historical Dictionary*, 436.

⁴⁷⁶ Large, *Nazi Games*, 4.

⁴⁷⁷ Ibid., 4-5.

context of Germany at the time.⁴⁷⁸ German Jews were prevented from participating in the 1936 Olympics even as the ceremonies continued to use and develop imagery which pointed towards a ‘unified world community.’⁴⁷⁹ As Bell observes, the imagery of the Olympic ceremonies hold the capacity to encompass the ‘real-life contradictions’ inherent in the Games ‘while still orienting people toward [Olympic] ideals.’⁴⁸⁰ The history of the modern Olympic movement thus reveals a disjunct between the political realities of the Games and the transcendental ideals presented through its imagery.

Despite its unsavoury origins, the concept of the ‘pure’ Olympic Flame has entered official parlance as a legitimate facet of Olympic imagery. The temple setting of the Olympic lighting ritual suggests the concept of pseudo-religious holiness. Solar energy invites celestial associations: of transcendental light and heat entering the terrestrial plane as fire. The Greek setting calls to mind the Prometheus myth, in which heavenly power is harnessed as an earthly flame.⁴⁸¹ The ceremony’s emphasis on the holiness and purity of the Flame is not explained in the official sources. Instead, the Olympic Flame is generally discussed as representing ‘high ideals’ of human achievement, of which purity is presumably one.⁴⁸²

At the completion of the Olympic Flame lighting ceremony, the Flame is transferred into an Olympic torch to be carried from Greece to the country hosting the Olympic Games. Nominated ‘torchbearers’ carry the Flame in a relay around the host nation that usually lasts several days. The torch relay concludes when the Flame arrives at the host city, where it is carried into the Olympic stadium for the official commencement of the Games at the Olympic Opening Ceremony.⁴⁸³

⁴⁷⁸ See Large, *Nazi Games*, 5.

⁴⁷⁹ Bell, *Perspectives*, 233-234.

⁴⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 235.

⁴⁸¹ IOC, “Factsheet,” 1.

⁴⁸² Edworthy, *Torch Relay*, 9.

⁴⁸³ The torch relay was formerly known as the ‘Flame relay.’ John J. MacAloon, “Introduction: The Olympic Flame Relay. Local Knowledges of a Global Ritual Form,” *Sport in Society* 15, no. 5 (2012): 587, accessed 28 March 2016, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2012.693304>.

The torchbearers are likened to ‘messengers’ who bear ‘a message of peace’ in the form of the Olympic Flame.⁴⁸⁴ Carl Diem, the instigator of the torch relay, made an overt connection between the torch relay and the Olympic truce — a treaty which assured athletes peaceful passage to and from the ancient Games.⁴⁸⁵ The Olympic truce did not signal suspension of warfare, and has been largely romanticised by the modern Olympic Games.⁴⁸⁶ The modern Olympic Movement has appropriated the concept of the Olympic truce as part of its wider campaign ‘to build a peaceful and better world through sport...’⁴⁸⁷ The Olympic Flame emblem is one vehicle for communicating this agenda in its ceremonial use in the torch relay.

For its role in the 2012 Olympic torch relay, the Flame has been called ‘the focus of the most remarkable, emotionally charged nationwide event ever seen in [Britain].’⁴⁸⁸ Olympic torchbearers carried the Olympic Flame 15,775 kilometres (over 9,800 miles) in 78 days from Greece to the London Olympic stadium, with 8,000 torchbearers carrying the Flame along its route in Great Britain.⁴⁸⁹ The Flame passed within an hour’s journey of 95% of the British population.⁴⁹⁰ At all other times the Flame was inaccessible to most people except by television footage; but the torch relay brought the Flame, with all that it represents, into local communities.⁴⁹¹ The immediacy of the Flame suggested the immediacy of the Games. Its physical presence communicated the notion that the Olympic Games were relevant and accessible to the general public, and validated public participation in celebrating the Games.

⁴⁸⁴ IOC, “Factsheet,” 1.

⁴⁸⁵ Large, *Nazi Games*, 17. See also: International Olympic Committee, “Olympic Truce,” accessed 6 February 2017, <https://www.olympic.org/olympic-truce> <https://www.olympic.org/olympic-truce>

⁴⁸⁶ Large, *Nazi Games*, 17.

⁴⁸⁷ “Olympic Truce.”

⁴⁸⁸ Tom Knight and Sybil Ruscoe, *London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games: The Official Commemorative Book* (Chichester: Wiley, 2012), 34.

⁴⁸⁹ IOC, “Factsheet,” 6.

⁴⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁹¹ MacAloon, “Flame Relay,” 584.

The journey of the torch relay revolves around a question of survival: ‘can a single, little flame be kept alive across all that distance?’⁴⁹² This question provides the drama for the journey, transforming ‘passive spectators into emotive congregants’ as those who line the route become invested in the relay’s success.⁴⁹³ As spectators of the 2012 Olympic torch relay discovered, however, the pragmatic answer is contrary to the narrative one. Although the Flame is presented as an undying emblem, it is not immune to weather conditions or malfunctions.⁴⁹⁴ Sometimes, the Flame goes out. The ritual or narrative existence of the Flame is held to be more important than its literal continuation.

The concept of the eternal Flame is a fictive device which holds the torch relay together, and helps keep the Olympic and Paralympic imagery intact. Similarly, the virtues of fairness and integrity supposedly embodied by the Flame may not be reflected in the realities of Olympic sporting competitions. Conflicts between nationalities and ideologies have broken into the observable neutrality of the Games, from peaceful protests against racial injustice to fist-fights between contestants from enemy countries.⁴⁹⁵ In 1972, terrorist acts led to the murder of eleven Israeli participants within the Olympic Village.⁴⁹⁶ Olympic purity has also been disrupted from within the sporting proceedings themselves. The Olympic Games have been subject to a number of scandals related to performance-enhancing drugs, match fixing, and other forms of misconduct.⁴⁹⁷ Alongside other organisational symbols such as the distinctive Olympic and Paralympic flags, the ritual use of the Flame emblem helps to form a narrative of virtue and unity designed to enhance public perception of the Games.⁴⁹⁸ The associations of fire with purity and human endeavour help to emphasise Olympic and

⁴⁹² MacAloon, “Flame Relay,” 583.

⁴⁹³ *Ibid.*, 584.

⁴⁹⁴ Telegraph Sport, “London 2012 Olympics: torch goes out on day three,” *Telegraph*, 21 May 2012, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/sport/olympics/torch-relay/9279349/London-2012-Olympics-torch-goes-out-on-day-three.html>.

⁴⁹⁵ Bell, *Perspectives*, 234.

⁴⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹⁷ See, for example, “Olympics badminton: Eight women disqualified from doubles,” BBC News, 1 August 2012, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/olympics/19072677>.

⁴⁹⁸ For further detail on the symbolism of unity at the Olympic Games, see Bell, *Perspectives*, 233-234.

Paralympic aspirations — even at times when reported misconduct at the Games may be garnering media attention.

For members of the public, the Flame became the subject of admiration and even veneration. Spectators commonly ‘gather around torchbearers and ask to “just touch” the torch’ even after the Flame has been transferred into another torch and carried to the next leg of the relay.⁴⁹⁹ MacAloon applies Durkheim’s theory of ‘the contagion of the sacred’ to the Flame, noting how the Flame not only presents crowds with the potential for a pseudo-religious experience but actively transforms the ritual properties of the torch itself.⁵⁰⁰ Even after the Flame has departed, passed on to the next torchbearer, its vessels are treated like sacred objects. As the Olympic emblem, the Flame functioned as a metonymy for the Olympic Games and all that London 2012 was seen to represent.

Olympic Ceremony (2): Olympic Opening Ceremony

The 2012 Olympic Opening Ceremony told the story of Britain’s transition from agrarian way of life to industrialisation. During the ceremonial performance, unseen fire fuels the technological progress that eventually produces the Olympic rings of London 2012. The fires of the industrial revolution are not depicted, but the smoke that wells up through rising chimneys and billows out from beneath the ground attests to fire’s narrative (if not physical) presence.⁵⁰¹ The brutal efficiency of the industrial revolution contrasts sharply to the playful, idealised country life shown at the beginning of the act. Fire is an agent of transformation to a new age at the cost of an older way of life. However, the choice to stage the creation of the Olympic rings as an act of forging acknowledges the creative capacity of fire. In a rousing conclusion to the story of industrialisation, a giant crucible is upturned and special effects dramatise molten metal ‘pouring’ down a large channel and into a giant cast metal ring.

Overhead, four identical rings converge, glowing as if newly-forged. As the first ring is raised up to join its companions in the air, the smoke-filled chimneys descend back into the ground: the act of creation supersedes the destruction. The rings overlap into the Olympic

⁴⁹⁹ MacAloon, “Flame Relay,” 587.

⁵⁰⁰ Ibid.

⁵⁰¹ Author’s notes from televised footage of the 2012 Olympic Opening Ceremony.

rings formation, which rains down sparks in a dense cloud over the stadium. This is a prolonged moment; a spectacle duly observed by audience and performers alike.⁵⁰² The image fills screens around the stadium, drawing the audience's attention, while performers on the ground stare reverently upwards. Smoke billows upwards from the still-glowing rings. Despite the ill-effects of industrialisation, fire has nonetheless helped produce something desirable: the multi-ringed symbol of Olympic unity.

The entrance of the torch into the stadium and subsequent lighting of the cauldron form the climax of the Opening Ceremony. As the Flame enters the stadium, the Olympic running track lights up with each step of the torchbearer. The effect is one of progressive illumination, in which the track itself appears to respond to the presence of the Flame — to reflect it, absorb it, amplify it.⁵⁰³ The Olympic Flame is welcomed as a long-awaited guest, received with cheering from the crowd and 'witnessed by an honour guard.'⁵⁰⁴ The Flame is personified as a personal presence deserving of praise and respect. It is seen to offer its own inimitable contribution to the Games.

Finally, the the Olympic Flame is transferred into the Olympic cauldron and the Games are officially declared open. The lighting of the Olympic cauldron forms the culmination of both the Opening Ceremony and the Torch Relay. The cauldron for London 2012 was designed by Thomas Heatherwick, and was constructed using copper 'petals' each able to sustain a gas-fuelled flame. The number of petals represented the number of competing nations, meaning that in its very structure the cauldron represented multiplicity and unity.⁵⁰⁵ The petals were each mounted on a single metal pole, so they could be raised or lowered depending on the stage of the ceremony. They were designed to begin burning separately, in a lowered position, before being raised up into one large bouquet. In the lowered position, each nation's flame burned individually; when the petals are raised together they formed a roaring cauldron. Like the burning bush of Exodus 3, these copper petals burned but were

⁵⁰² Author's notes.

⁵⁰³ Ibid.

⁵⁰⁴ Live commentary.

⁵⁰⁵ Author's notes.

not consumed. Once installed in the cauldron, the Flame was kept alight day and night throughout the Olympic Games.

Olympic Ceremony (3): Olympic Closing Ceremony

In comparison to the Olympic Opening Ceremony, the use of fire imagery in the 2012 Olympic Closing Ceremony may appear limited. Aside from the Olympic Flame, still burning in its cauldron at one end of the stadium, direct uses of the imagery are reserved until the end of the ceremony. However, unlike the other ceremonies of London 2012, the Olympic Closing Ceremony uses fire imagery to address a specific dilemma. Now that the sporting events are over and the celebrations are drawing to a close, Olympic custom dictates that the Flame must be extinguished. What does it mean to snuff out the Olympic emblem? What will become of the ideals the Olympic Movement has attempted to foster among the international community? What happens when the fire dies?

The Closing Ceremony takes this dimension of the Olympic narrative into the final act, which offers some answers to these questions. The flaming petals of the cauldron are lowered and the Flame, which had burned so impressively when the petals had been united, separates into dozens of smaller flames. Behind the unfurled cauldron, a pyrotechnic burst of sparks and illuminated smoke clear to reveal a stylised phoenix sculpture. The frame of the phoenix is alight; when the fire dies down, the frame is left glowing hotly. The eternal presence of the Flame is reaffirmed by the themes of resurrection and renewal associated with the phoenix.⁵⁰⁶ As the fire of the cauldron dies petal by petal, the phoenix remains luminous above, suggesting that the essence of the Flame lives on. The phoenix reminds spectators that the spirit of the Olympics and the Movement's dedication to its virtues have not died with the fire. On the contrary, the phoenix stands as 'an emblem of... the indomitable human spirit' which continues through adversity.⁵⁰⁷ The Olympic Flame will be lit again, at the next Games. The phoenix imagery intimates that each new Olympic Flame kindled is a continuation of the last.⁵⁰⁸

⁵⁰⁶ Tresidder, *Symbols*, s.v. "Phoenix."

⁵⁰⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁰⁸ Author's notes from televised footage of the 2012 Olympic Closing Ceremony.

London 2012: Paralympic Games

Paralympic Ceremony (1): Paralympic Lighting Ceremony & Torch Relay

The official lighting of the 2012 Paralympic Flame took place in the village of Stoke Mandeville, England. Unlike the Olympic lighting ceremony, the Flame was not ignited from the sun but kindled from four other flames. Before the Paralympic lighting ceremony, four ‘National Flames’ were kindled in an innovative move to incorporate the four member nations of Team GB. Scouting groups of varying ages and physical capabilities ascended Ben Nevis, Scafell Pike, Snowdon, and Slieve Donard. At the summit, the scouts used ‘a traditional method of striking a ferrocerium rod against a steel surface’ to set light to a small amount of kindling.⁵⁰⁹ Once caught, the four flames were transferred into ‘miner’s lanterns’ to be transported to their respective nation’s capital city, where the lanterns were used to ignite four much larger ‘National Flames.’ Finally, the National Flames were brought together to form the Paralympic Flame at Stoke Mandeville.

The 2012 Paralympics achieved extensive public participation through celebratory events dubbed ‘Flame Festivals’ and ‘Flame Celebrations,’ which marked significant moments in the torch relay.⁵¹⁰ As in the Olympic torch relay, the Flame was established as a symbol accessible to all through its physical presence in towns and cities around the country. However, the 2012 Paralympic torch relay was much smaller in scale compared with the Olympic torch relay of the same year. The Paralympic torchbearers numbered 580, co-operating in teams of five in order to deliver the Flame across 148 kilometres (92 miles) in 24 hours.⁵¹¹

The organising committee for London 2012 emphasised the ‘physical human endeavour’ involved in the creation and transport of the Paralympic Flame, doing away with the Olympics’ focus on transcendental purity in favour of more humanistic rhetoric.⁵¹² Miners’

⁵⁰⁹ Tim Williams, “Paralympics 2012: Flames lit across Britain at the start of Paralympic torch relay celebrations,” *The Telegraph*, 22 August 2012, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/sport/olympics/paralympic-sport/9492379/Paralympics-2012-flames-lit-across-Britain-at-the-start-of-Paralympic-torch-relay-celebrations.html>.

⁵¹⁰ “London 2012 Paralympic Games Torch Relay,” Paralympic Movement, accessed 2 March 2016, <https://www.paralympic.org/london-2012-torch-relay>.

⁵¹¹ Knight and Ruscoe, *Commemorative Book*, 35; “Paralympic Games Torch Relay.”

⁵¹² “Paralympic Games Torch Relay.”

lamps, after all, do not connote the production of clean energy. Instead, the Flame was taken to represent the human effort and creativity that produced it. Yet the celestial link was not entirely lost for the Paralympics: as flames ignited upon the highest peaks, their birthing ritual took place at the boundary of earth and sky. Like Moses bearing the words of God (Leviticus 10:1-5; Exodus 34:29), fire was brought down from the mountain and spread among the people through the subsequent torch relay. Even without the classical aesthetic of the Olympic lighting ceremony, one might find a connection with the Prometheus myth: he, too, brought fire down from the gods residing on Mount Olympus.⁵¹³ Celestial fire imagery continued to appear at various points throughout the Paralympic ceremonies.

Paralympic Ceremony (2): Paralympic Opening Ceremony

A golden orrery presided over the stadium for the duration of the 2012 Paralympic Opening Ceremony. Also known as a celestial sphere, an orrery is a mechanical model which depicts astronomical revolutions. It consists of hollow, interlocking rings: an antique representation of the heavens. Its presence throughout the Opening Ceremony prefigured the presence of the Paralympic Flame which, once arrived, would burn for the duration of the Games. At the beginning of the ceremony, during the ‘Big Bang’ sequence (a kind of dramatised scientific creation narrative), the orrery trails smoke as if on fire as it descends towards the Earth.⁵¹⁴

In his opening speech, theoretical physicist Stephen Hawking asks, ‘What is it that breathes fire into the equations and makes a universe for them to describe?’⁵¹⁵ The image of fire is used as a poetic portrayal of those forces active in the formation of the universe, representing energy that must exist before the universe in order to animate it. Interestingly, there is also a suggestion of a pre-existent force that can, at least figuratively, be said to ‘breathe.’ Read theologically, there is an obvious parallel with God’s life-giving breath and his power to send fire from heaven into the known world. In Genesis 2:7, God ‘breathed into

⁵¹³ Tresidder, *Symbols*, s.v. “Prometheus.”

⁵¹⁴ Author’s notes from televised footage of the 2012 Paralympic Opening Ceremony.

⁵¹⁵ Author’s notes.

[Adam's] nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being.' The divine breath is an animating force which imparts life into creation.

Inspired by Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, the drama staged during the Paralympic Opening Ceremony establishes scientific discovery as the key to human survival in a chaotic universe. Describing the Flame's role during the Paralympic Opening Ceremony, the programme reads: 'As the Torch enters the Stadium this evening, it will carry the spirit of our Paralympic Enlightenment and bring the nations of the world together.'⁵¹⁶ The image of fire is used to represent the aspirations professed by the Paralympic Movement: to unite people from all over the globe in joint pursuit of human achievement and inclusivity.⁵¹⁷

The 'enlightenment' symbolised by the Flame is also conceived in intellectual terms. Learning from books and human experience allows the young Miranda to attain freedom — not only for herself, but for the wider human community. In reaching for the golden orrery, suspended above, Miranda 'break[s] the glass ceiling' to 'set us free.'⁵¹⁸ In this narrative, the enlightenment represented by the Paralympic Flame relates to knowledge of the universe and knowledge of the self. Such enlightenment leads to empowerment, but 'the journey towards empowerment can be explosive.'⁵¹⁹ The conceit is dramatised through a traditional whirling dervish, whose flaming skirt whirls unceasingly as he revolves on a spinning platform.⁵²⁰ Pyrotechnics spew streams of fire at the edges of the dervish's stage. The programme explains that chaos stands as a counterpoint to human rationality.⁵²¹

The entrance of the torch into the stadium is billed 'Enlightenment' — an obvious pun on the physical and figurative characteristics of the Paralympic Flame.⁵²² Much is made of its

⁵¹⁶ *Opening Ceremony Programme*, 34.

⁵¹⁷ "IPC - Who we are."

⁵¹⁸ Author's transcription.

⁵¹⁹ *Opening Ceremony Programme*, 32.

⁵²⁰ This could be another reference to *The Tempest*, in which the spirit Ariel manifests as fire during the magic-induced storm.

⁵²¹ *Opening Ceremony Programme*, 24.

⁵²² *London 2012 Paralympic Games Opening Ceremony Programme* (Middlesex: Haymarket Network, 2012), 34.

approach by the commentators, and the crowd applauds in anticipation of the Flame.⁵²³ The announcer heralds the arrival of the torch in the same manner as she introduces invited dignitaries: ‘Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome the Paralympic Flame!’⁵²⁴ Like Prometheus, torchbearer and Paralympian triathlete Joe Townsend brings fire down from the heavens, descending into the stadium on a zip wire.

The Olympic and Paralympic ceremonies had much to set them apart from each other, but a thread of continuity was maintained in the cauldron and the Flame emblem. Differences in their ceremonial presentation did not jeopardise this connection, which is contingent on the wider context of the relationship between the Olympic and Paralympic Movements. However, their respective ceremonies endowed the Olympic and Paralympic Flames with different emphases. In their conceptualisation at the ceremonies in 2012, the Olympic Flame spoke of *heavenly* virtue in the form of ceremonial purity and human achievement; but the Paralympic Flame celebrated the *human* virtue of progress and enlightenment. These differing conceptualisations were built through the application of fire imagery in the Opening Ceremony performances, and in the ritual use of the Flame in the Olympic and Paralympic lighting ceremonies and torch relays.

Paralympic Ceremony (3): Paralympic Closing Ceremony

More than any other ceremony in London 2012, the Paralympic Closing Ceremony embraced the multivalent potential of the image of fire with a multiplicity of fire imagery. Before the extinguishing of the Flame and official close of the Games, the Paralympic Closing Ceremony invited its audience to participate in the ‘Festival of the Flame,’ an invigorating fusion of earthly and celestial fire imagery embodied in fire-based performance art.⁵²⁵ In the pre-recorded prologue to the ceremony, a procession of motley characters marches towards the stadium. Fire imagery abounds through their use of fire performance art, burning miner’s lamps, and fire-powered steam vehicles. The use of miner’s lamps creates a connection between this procession and the Paralympic torch relay, though the Flame itself

⁵²³ Author’s notes.

⁵²⁴ Author’s transcription.

⁵²⁵ Author’s notes from televised footage of the Paralympic Closing Ceremony.

is not part of this particular journey. Instead, it is symbolised in the form of a book, the cover of which bears the illustration of a flame. The leader of the procession holds the book aloft as if it is something which drives the movement. Meanwhile, a child opens the same volume as if it is a storybook, placing the processional imagery within the context of the imagination. The procession associates fire with aggression, excitement, energy, and the power of the imagination.

Once within the stadium and part of the live opening act, the fire performers from the procession are joined by other dancers who appear to personify other cardinal elements (such as wind and water). At this point in the performance, the movements of the elemental figures characterise them as aggressive, chaotic forces.⁵²⁶ The ‘wind gremlins,’ for example, cause gusts which propel the Paralympic emblem, the Agitos, out of the arena.⁵²⁷ There is a dream-like quality to this sequence as they flank a stationary vehicle named ‘Human Endeavour.’ The elemental characters jeer as a Paralympian amputee struggles to climb the flagpole mounted on the vehicle. Although the fire-based characters are not successful in thwarting the climber’s ascent, performers bearing flame throwers soon scorch the ground beneath, burning patterns into the grass. Here, the Paralympic Closing Ceremony presents fire as dynamic, frightening, and destructive.

Despite the implicit threat of the fire performers during the opening sequences, the live commentary draws out the creativity, ingenuity, and personal expression represented in their steampunk design.⁵²⁸ Steampunk is a genre, subculture, and aesthetic; it is characterised by a playful re-imagining of history (especially the Victorian era) in which steam power replaces electricity as the primary source of energy.⁵²⁹ The celebration of a steampunk aesthetic contrasts with the more restrained attitude towards fire-powered technology exhibited in the Olympic Opening Ceremony, with its orderly and mostly serious depiction of the

⁵²⁶ Author’s notes.

⁵²⁷ The Agitos is the Paralympic equivalent of the interlocking Olympic rings.

⁵²⁸ Live commentary.

⁵²⁹ Rebecca Onion, “Reclaiming the Machine: An introductory look at steampunk in everyday practice,” *Neo-Victorian Studies* 1, no. 1 (2008): 139, accessed 21 January 2017, http://www.neovictorianstudies.com/past_issues/Autumn2008/NVS%201-1%20R-Onion.pdf.

industrial revolution. The application of steampunk in the Paralympic Closing Ceremony indicates a creative, and subversive, response to history and societal expectations.⁵³⁰

Through the power of fire to meld, modify, and re-create, steampunk embraces the relationship between human and machine with a sense of primal physicality. Commentator Jeff Adams recalled ‘having to cut and weld and modify [his] racing chairs’ during in his career as a Paralympic athlete, remarking that the steampunk machinery resonated with that experience.⁵³¹ He added that customising sports equipment is commonplace amongst Paralympians, a process which he describes as resulting in individual self-expression as well as enhanced functionality.⁵³² Columnist Caitlin Moran develops this idea briefly but earnestly in her otherwise irreverent and comedic work *Moranifesto*, noting that Paralympians ‘have a different relationship with science, machines and vehicles’ because such technologies relate to the expression and performance of the athletes’ own bodies.⁵³³ Through this connection, the steampunk imagery of the 2012 Paralympics demonstrates fire purposed for creativity.

The elemental characters and steampunk vehicles are followed by the ‘Cycle of Seasons,’ a series of themed dance performances to live music performed by Coldplay. The previously anarchic elemental characters become united through their choreography, which constitutes a creative act of celebration and communal reflection. The grassy area which had previously been scorched by flamethrowers is revisited as a dance stage. The burned grass is revealed to make precise artistic patterns. Again, Moran reads the subversive yet creative acts of the steampunk characters in terms of the Paralympian body:

As a mass of performers came into the stadium wielding blowtorches, and burned crop circles and fractal patterns into the ground, tattooing the turf, it mirrored the many tattoos we saw on the Paralympians’ bodies. Another way of reclaiming your body from the things it’s had to endure — a needle used in celebration, rather than necessity, when in pain.⁵³⁴

⁵³⁰ As the nomenclature ‘punk’ indicates, steampunk is considered a ‘counterculture practice’ (Onion, “Reclaiming the Machine,” 139).

⁵³¹ Author’s transcription.

⁵³² Live commentary.

⁵³³ Caitlin Moran, *Moranifesto* (London: Ebury Press, 2016), 150.

⁵³⁴ Moran, *Moranifesto*, 150.

The apparent destruction on the earth is transformed into a fertile creative platform. So, too, are the previously chaotic bodies of the dancers shown to be strong, controlled, and creative. The performers dance in pairs: some in wheelchairs, others on their feet. Fire staffs, flaming at both ends, are brought onto the platform and incorporated into the dance. The manner in which the flaming staffs are passed between bodies constitutes a gentle and intimate exchange between partners. Here we find the image of fire used in a way that is much more obviously compatible with conceptions of the Paralympic Flame. Co-operation, inclusion, and mutual support are found in the way differently-abled bodies move together and share their flames.⁵³⁵

At the close of their set, the dancers move aside as a gigantic wire frame rises slowly from the performance platform. The frame depicts a benevolent bearded face, which is set alight by the same flamethrowers that were used to scorch the earth. Yet this is not an act of destruction, but animation. Much like the phoenix sculpture of the Olympic Closing Ceremony, the otherwise static frame is transformed by fire into a source of light and movement. The flaming face represents what the commentators describe as the ‘Sun King.’⁵³⁶ The design bears a striking resemblance to the Green Man (whose visage is presented in a very similar manner during the annual Beltane Fire Festival in Edinburgh; see Chapter 5). Beneath the Sun King, dancers raise fiery batons; above, the aerialists spin through the air as if to mimic rising flames. As the ‘Cycle of Seasons’ continues, fire is never absent from the performance for long.

At various points throughout the ceremony, a priest-like figure delivers liturgical proclamations from a podium. This liturgy repeatedly signals the inclusion of the audience, who are addressed as a congregation assembled for a religious ritual. The speaker on the podium declares: ‘Let the love that the Paralympics has kindled in our hearts burn brightly as we come together as one for the Festival of the Flame.’⁵³⁷ Fire is presented as a metaphor for human connection and the values that strengthen the bond; a symbol of unity and united human spirit. Echoing descriptions of the Olympic/Paralympic Flame itself, the Festival of

⁵³⁵ Author’s notes.

⁵³⁶ Author’s transcription.

⁵³⁷ Author’s transcription.

the Flame is said to be ‘the symbol of the spirit of the Games,’ which is characterised in the liturgical narration as a spirit of unity.⁵³⁸ Moreover, by their inclusion, the audience is given the responsibility of maintaining Paralympic values beyond the celebration of the Games. The audience even sings together, again like a congregation immersed in sacred ritual, in response to Coldplay’s music during the ‘Cycle of Seasons.’

At the close of the ceremony, the unified Flame of the cauldron separates into individual flames as the petals are lowered. The flames die down until all but one petal is extinguished. Two torchbearers capture the last of the fire, transferring the Paralympic Flame into their torches. This act mirrors the moment the cauldron was lit during the Paralympic Opening Ceremony, except in reverse. There is another key difference: instead of one torchbearer carrying the Flame around the stadium, there are now two. The multiplicity of the Flame continues. The Flame has not been extinguished; it has multiplied. The ritual’s final act is to send the Flame back out into the world as if to begin a new torch relay. While the journey of the Flame does not literally continue, the commentators celebrate how, in the departure of the Flame, the ‘spirit’ of the Games lives on.⁵³⁹

Interpreting the multiplicity of fire imagery at London 2012

The Flame functions as an emblem of Olympic and Paralympic ideals. However, it is rarely pinned down to a rigid explanation in the official sources. Instead, the ceremonial performances of the Olympic and Paralympic Games serve to provide interpretive tools for the audience — through commentary, ritual, performance art, and the continual emphasis on celebrating human achievement. During London 2012, the Olympic and Paralympic lighting ceremonies set the tone for how this symbolic flame was to be interpreted, removing some associations (for instance, uncontrolled destruction) by embracing others (such as peace and purity). The focus on the Flame’s origin in the lighting ceremonies — whether scaling mountains to light the fire, or capturing solar energy in the style of ancient Greece — suggested the idea of fire from heaven. Historical and cosmic origin stories for the Flame

⁵³⁸ Author’s notes.

⁵³⁹ Live commentary.

allowed the International Olympic and Paralympic Movements to extend their rhetoric of human virtue back in time as well as forward; temporally as well as spatially.

The Flame communicated established Olympic and Paralympic values whilst also inviting physical and imaginative involvement of athletes and spectators. The Flame must remain recognisable for those outside the organisation in order to be an effective emblem, yet porous enough that it can be continually re-situated and reimagined within new cultural and social contexts. Certain ceremonial actions, such as the torch relay and the lighting of the cauldron, are seen to be integral to the way in which the Flame is presented.⁵⁴⁰ However, the tone of the Opening and Closing Ceremonies may be radically different between Games, placing the Flame in a new ceremonial context each time. One might compare the momentous gathering and unfurling petals of London 2012 to the spiralling kinetic sculpture and relatively small Flame of Rio de Janeiro 2016.⁵⁴¹ Live commentators on the official Olympic YouTube channel made connections between the environmental concerns of the Rio 2016 Olympic Opening Ceremony and the solar imagery used in the cauldron design.⁵⁴² Meanwhile, the Rio 2016 Paralympic Opening Ceremony downplayed the role of fire imagery so that it was almost absent besides the Paralympic Flame itself. In contrast to the steam-powered aesthetic featured at the 2012 Paralympics, the Paralympic Opening Ceremony in Rio de Janeiro showcased the polished precision of electronic machinery, casting a robotic arm as a dance partner for Paralympian performer Amy Purdy.⁵⁴³

The 2012 Olympic and Paralympic ceremonies exhibited different tendencies in how strictly they handled the Olympic/Paralympic Flame image. The 2012 Olympic ceremonies

⁵⁴⁰ These are core rituals which must be performed during each Olympic/Paralympic Games. See “Origins, Values and Ceremonies,” International Olympic Movement, accessed 10 April 2016, <http://www.olympic.org/olympic-torch-relay-origin-values-ceremony>.

⁵⁴¹ The cauldron used in the 2016 Rio de Janeiro Olympic and Paralympic Games was designed by Anthony Howe. Unlike most cauldrons, Howe’s cauldron was suspended in mid-air as part of a kinetic sculpture.

⁵⁴² Olympic Channel, “Rio 2016 Opening Ceremony Full HD Replay | Rio 2016 Olympic Games,” YouTube video, 4:09:08, 25 September 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N_qXm9HY9Ro. The lighting of the cauldron and relevant commentary occurs around the 4 hour mark.

⁵⁴³ Available to view at the official Paralympic Games YouTube channel, “Rio 2016 Paralympic Games | Opening Ceremony,” YouTube video, 4:05:28, 8 September 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hbig-14naZ8>. Purdy’s performance begins around the 3 hours 35 minute mark.

rarified fire by limiting the use of the image. This kept interpretations of fire broadly in line with the symbolism of human virtue and achievement, so that the other interpretations of fire in the Olympic Opening and Closing Ceremonies were much less prominent. In the 2012 Olympics, the Olympic Flame was the only fire image that really mattered on a grand, symbolic scale. All other fire imagery was pressed into service of the Olympic emblem and, by extension, the Olympic values it represents.

In contrast, the sheer scale and variety of fire imagery presented during the 2012 Paralympic ceremonies provided all kinds of overlapping and sometimes contradictory interpretations of fire. The Paralympic Closing Ceremony, in particular, democratised the Flame by making its imagery directly applicable to the audience. More than spectators, audience members became vicariously involved in the ceremony through liturgical declarations that described Paralympic fire as being ‘kindled within our hearts.’⁵⁴⁴ The spoken word and visual representations of fire were mutually reinforcing in a way which enhanced the ritual atmosphere. In hermeneutic terms, the decision to make the Flame available for identification with the audience is less controllable but more efficacious. If the Paralympic Flame applies to everyone, then we can all participate in what it stands for (however that is construed) — and doing so will unite us.

The 2012 Olympics and Paralympics in London presented the Flame, and many more examples of fire imagery, from within a British cultural and artistic context. Taken together, these ceremonies construed fire as destructive and creative, chaotic and spectacular. Fire offers an expression of human harmony, and even intimacy when carefully exchanged. It is an energy source for human advancement and a metaphor for adversity. It is a property of the heavens and yet obtainable on earth. It is an agent of change, a pre-existent force, personified, always available to those who dare to push the limits of mortal ability. The London 2012 Paralympic Opening and Closing Ceremonies repeatedly identified fire with the human spirit. Both the Olympic and Paralympic ceremonies were concerned with human achievement, and fire played a galvanising role in the narratives each ceremony presented.

In the Paralympic Closing Ceremony, the achievement of the Paralympian ascending the ‘Human Endeavour’ changes everything. The transformative power of this moment was

⁵⁴⁴ Author’s transcription.

signalled by a transformation in the way fire is used. From this point onwards, fire played a creative role in the ceremony. It no longer signalled destruction. Previous acts of destruction (the scorching of the earth) were even rehabilitated in the service of creative expression. The totality of this transition might suggest some reasons why the artistic director, Kim Gavin, did not see an overarching narrative to be at work during the Paralympic Closing Ceremony.⁵⁴⁵ Perhaps he felt that the move from the destruction to the creativity of fire represented an irreconcilable shift that he struggled to conceive narratively. His choice to pit fire against human endeavour might appear to be in contradiction to the representation of the human spirit through the Paralympic Flame, which was established in the Paralympic Opening Ceremony. In either case, the solution rests in acknowledging fire as a multivalent image. Though fire may be destructive and chaotic when wielded aggressively, unification and transformation abound when fire is incorporated into creative expression of the community.

The Flame's significance is derived from ceremonial context, and the emotions evoked by that context. As observed by MacAloon, the excitement generated by events such as the torch relay inspired appreciation and admiration of the Flame emblem.⁵⁴⁶ By incorporating emotional responses, the meaning(s) of the Flame are available to a wide and diverse audience. The Flame's immediacy is in emotion rather than in intellectual decoding of the symbol. The torch relay becomes a metonymy for collectively striving towards full human potential: physically, spiritually, and as an international community. Envisioning fire as spirit instills the image with an immaterial, transcendental quality. Through fire imagery, sporting achievement is elevated beyond the efforts of individual athletes.

The prominent place of the Olympics and Paralympics in international sport and culture is not solely attributable to fire imagery; but the Flame emblem and ceremonial uses of fire continue to shape how audiences understand and respond to the Games. Fire is used as a focus for ritual, a means of engagement for athletes, officials, and audience members alike. The ceremonial use of fire imagery elevates the Games from an international sporting event to an experience which promotes community and personal transformation. At times, this

⁵⁴⁵ Live commentary.

⁵⁴⁶ MacAloon, "Flame Relay," 585.

experience can be pseudo-religious in nature, as certain ritual aspects of the ceremonies suggest (for instance, the Olympic lighting ceremony; the liturgical elements of the 2012 Paralympic Closing Ceremony). The application of fire imagery helps determine the nature of the ceremony by offering an evocative, but open, image. That is to say, the image of fire can evoke a personal or communal response without the need for precise explanation of its symbolism. The multivalence of the image enables it to resonate with a whole host of emotions, concepts, and themes. The existence of multiple fire images does not necessarily mean the dilution of the symbolism; rather, the image of fire is able to contain distinctions and paradoxes. As the 2012 Paralympic ceremonies show, multiple fire images can be mutually interpretive, allowing for richness and complexity in the imagery which may be particularly suited to religious expression and experience.

Chapter Conclusion

Communities who encounter the image of fire interpret its significance according to context: not only in reference to the social imagination in general, but also their community context in particular. These cultural and social layers of context give rise to certain dominant associations. The image of fire is not *limited* to those dominant associations; rather, they provide the shared imaginative context for interpretation. Contextual approaches thus constitute the appropriate means of interpretation in assessing (and applying) fire imagery within specific communities. The multivalence of the image of fire means that various associations or meanings can be evoked at once. Moreover, multiple instances of fire imagery can generate contrasting interpretations of fire simultaneously within a single conceptual framework.

The creation and destruction of *Temple* provided an occasion for separate sides of a divided community to meet and co-operate on a project intended to facilitate reconciliation and remembrance. During the ceremonial burning, the scale and visibility of the fire offered a focal point around which the community gathered despite their differences, subverting the sectarian imagery of the Northern Irish bonfire tradition. The application of fire brought about transformation of the temple structure and ceremonial cleansing for its participants. Through the destructiveness of fire, tokens of pain and grief became tokens of healing. Moreover, fire provided a context in which community communication and transformation

was as a real possibility. *Temple* gave the community new ways to conceive established fire imagery; in doing so, it communicated the potential for new ways of conceiving established community relationships.

The Olympic and Paralympic ceremonies of London 2012 used the image of fire to communicate organisational aspirations on behalf of their sporting communities. The Flame emblem was characterised as an image of human endeavour, sporting achievement, unity, and enlightenment.⁵⁴⁷ As such, the Flame was used to present the idea that high moral standards were integral to ‘the spirit of the Games,’ despite ongoing controversies over ethical aspects of the competitions.⁵⁴⁸ The Flame emblem promoted public participation in Olympic and Paralympic celebrations through the torch relays, while the cauldron illustrated the participation of many nations by combining dozens of separate flames into a single large-scale fire. The fire-based performances of the Paralympic Closing Ceremony invited the participation of the audience, who were identified as part of the Paralympic movement — and ostensibly united by the love symbolised by the Paralympic Flame.

Chapters 2 and 3 noted the interplay between destruction and creation in the experience of fire. *Temple* re-contextualised the bonfire’s destructive capacity in a way that presented fire imagery as a symbol of purification and creative transformation. In imagery as in life, fire need not be conceived as *either* destructive *or* creative; it can be both. The Olympic Opening Ceremony held the destructive and creative potential of fire for manufacture in tension, mourning environmental losses but celebrating the construction of the Olympic rings. Meanwhile, the pseudo-religious Olympic lighting ceremony made the Flame emblem into a symbol of heavenly virtue and purification which was then disseminated through the torch relay.

The Paralympics used the image of fire to explore creative transformation of individuals and their situations, as in the case of Miranda in the Paralympic Opening Ceremony. Over the course of the Paralympic Closing Ceremony, the use of fire imagery shifted from the portrayal of an untamed, chaotic element to a sign of co-operative, generative energy. These

⁵⁴⁷ Edworth, *Torch Relay*, 8-9; *Opening Ceremony Programme*, 34.

⁵⁴⁸ Live commentary from Paralympic Opening and Closing Ceremonies; Edworth, *Torch Relay*, 9.

changes in fire imagery coincided with transitions in tone or atmosphere of the wider performance.

In each event, physical flames was used to generate a sense of otherworldly presence. At *Temple*, the burning appeared to animate the temple structure. At London 2012, the Flame emblem was personified and its arrival signalled the official commencement of the Games. The phoenix imagery of the Olympic Closing Ceremony expressed the idea that the Flame emblem would return for the next Games as part of a cycle of renewal; whereas the Paralympic Opening Ceremony characterised fire as a pre-existent cosmic force which brings life and movement. In the Paralympic Closing Ceremony, the presence of fire was associated with energy, movement, chaos, destruction, and creativity.

The image of fire is versatile in its multivalence. Any given instance of fire imagery need not be restricted to a singular ‘meaning.’ Various connotations or symbolic emphases might be at work simultaneously in the image. The 2012 Olympic and Paralympic ceremonies provide ample evidence of this, and showed that the range of possibilities presented by multivalent fire imagery need not be treated as a set of ‘either/or’ choices. Likewise, multiple instances of fire imagery need not represent compatible ideas, even within the same ceremonial context. It is possible for a ceremony or ritual to entertain a number of alternative presentations of fire.

Faced with such extensive variability in the image of fire, there is a danger that any detailed analysis of a fire ritual might become overwhelmed by various interpretive possibilities. However, three themes by which to organise further discussion of fire imagery have presented themselves. The multivalence of fire imagery facilitates *communication and participation*; suggests a process of *purification and creative transformation*; and contributes to the ceremonial or ritual setting as an active *presence*. Although far from absolute or exhaustive, these three themes will help to guide our approach as we turn to analyse case studies of three Scottish fire rituals. Delving into ritual encounters with fire will further elucidate the depth and complexity of the image of fire, demonstrate its potential to facilitate community explorations of transition and identity, and lead us to a fuller, more sophisticated understanding of the image’s theological resonances.

Chapter 5: Ritual Encounters with Fire

The thesis thus far has traced the image of fire through a number of contemporary encounters, construing various meanings and symbolic resonances presented by fire imagery in those settings. The image of fire has proven worthy of careful consideration, contributing to the conceptual landscape of various social and ceremonial contexts. In this chapter, I will demonstrate that the image of fire plays an operative role within three contemporary fire rituals. An analysis of Stonehaven Fireball Ceremony and the Beltane Fire Festival in Edinburgh will introduce ways in which fire can help create ritual space and generate liminal experience by inviting imaginative and sensory engagement in ritual. This will be followed by a consideration of the Up-Helly-Aa celebrations at Lerwick in Shetland, which will provide a counterpoint to certain ways fire imagery is applied at Stonehaven and Beltane. Each of these examples is of particular interest to this research, since the involvement of fire (and, by extension, fire imagery) is a central component for the rituals' efficacy due to its role in generating liminality. This chapter presents original research on these rites, drawn from first person observation attained from site visits. My analysis is supplemented by primary and secondary literature to support and contextualise the findings.

Stonehaven Fireball Ceremony, Beltane Fire Festival, and Up-Helly-Aa are community rites of passage: they mark seasonal progression and may be used by individuals to take on new aspects of community identity. Rites of passage mark transitions in identity and/or social status, and allow the individual and community to process times of change.⁵⁴⁹ This theory was described by French anthropologist Arnold van Gennep in 1909, who divided rites of passage into three stages: rites of separation (*pre-liminal rites*); rites of transition (*liminal rites*); and rites of incorporation back into society (*post-liminal rites*).⁵⁵⁰ The length, character, and significance of each phase may differ depending on the ritual.⁵⁵¹

⁵⁴⁹ Van Gennep, *Rites*, 3-4; Thomassen, *Liminality*, 1.

⁵⁵⁰ Van Gennep, *Rites*, 11. See also: Thomassen, *Liminality*, 14.

⁵⁵¹ Van Gennep, *Rites*, 11.

Using van Gennep's tripartite model for rites of passage, Tinsley and Matheson explore aspects of 'liminality' during the Beltane Fire Festival, providing a good precedent for analysing the liminality of Beltane ritual celebrations.⁵⁵² Due to their similarities as rites of passage, this approach can also be applied to the Stonehaven Fireball Ceremony and Lerwick's Up-Helly-Aa. Liminality pertains to the middle stage of any experience of transition — that point at which the old state has passed away, but the new state has not yet come.⁵⁵³ This can be both an exciting and an unsettling time, as normal structures and identity markers are absent (or, often, subverted).⁵⁵⁴ Extended 'in-betweenness' can cause deep anxiety because of the lack of stabilising social and psychological frameworks; so liminality is not, in itself, to be strived for. It is a necessary stage in any process of change nevertheless.⁵⁵⁵ Transition involves crossing boundaries; however, *liminal* is not the same as *marginal*.⁵⁵⁶ 'Liminality' does not refer to being on the edge of something, or pushing boundaries. It is the middle stage, after leaving one state but before entering another.⁵⁵⁷ In a much-quoted phrase, Turner described liminality as that which is 'betwixt and between.'⁵⁵⁸

Physical places can also be liminal, if they are separated from normal structures — for instance, 'no man's land' in which claims of ownership do not apply.⁵⁵⁹ A road which is temporarily closed off for a parade or marathon would be liminal space, since the normal rules are suspended until after the event, when normal ways of using the road are reinstated. The processional routes at Stonehaven and Up-Helly-Aa become liminal spaces through

⁵⁵² Tinsley and Matheson, "Layers of Passage," 141-158.

⁵⁵³ Thomassen, *Liminality*, 2.

⁵⁵⁴ Agnes Horvath, Bjørn Thomassen, and Harald Wydra, "Introduction: Liminality and the Search for Boundaries," in *Breaking Boundaries: Varieties of Liminality*, ed. Agnes Horvath et al. (New York/Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2015), 7.

⁵⁵⁵ Horvath, Thomassen, and Wydra, "Introduction," 7.

⁵⁵⁶ Thomassen, *Liminality*, 7.

⁵⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁵⁸ Victor W. Turner, "Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in 'Rites de Passage.' Symposium on New Approaches to the Study of Religion," in *Proceedings of the 1964 Annual Spring Meeting of the American Ethnological Society* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1964), 4-20.

⁵⁵⁹ Thomassen, *Liminality*, 91.

these exact means, offering physical context in which the image of fire operates. On the night of the Beltane Fire Festival, the ordinarily public location of Calton Hill is reserved only for festival attendees. In contrast to the rest of the city, which is continually illuminated by streetlights, the hill is shrouded in darkness except for patches of firelight. The physical liminality generated by fire helps to create and define the conditions for liminal experience.

Attention to liminality will help reveal ways fire and fire imagery may function within the three ritual contexts of the Stonehaven Fireball Ceremony, Beltane Fire Festival, and Lerwick's Up-Helly-Aa. Liminality is an appropriate model for analysis, since it provides a method of breaking down particular phases of a community rite of passage and examining the different elements at work. By taking note of the ways in which fire contributes to the liminality of the event, I will explore how fire shapes the workings of the ritual. In each of these community rituals, fire is present in the imagination before the event even begins, influencing the pre-liminal stage as participants separate themselves from familiar structures of daily routine. The liminal phase of the ritual can only begin when fire is ignited, and will only last as long as the fire burns. Each ritual reaches a climactic moment of fiery celebration before the festivities end and the participants assume their post-liminal state. When the flames go out, the participants must leave the ritual behind and begin to integrate their experiences of transition into their daily lives.

In these three case studies, the multivalence of fire imagery works alongside other images within the physical and conceptual environment. Up-Helly-Aa places the image of fire in juxtaposition with Viking imagery, especially in the boat-burning ritual which forms the climax of the torchlight procession. In the Stonehaven Fireball Ceremony, the fact that items with unwelcome associations are placed inside the fireballs to be destroyed suggests the purifying function of the rite. At the Beltane Fire Festival, the image of fire is given an important relationship to other images from nature, many of them personified.

Tinsley and Matheson's study on the Beltane Fire Festival focuses almost entirely on the community structure of the Beltane Fire Society and how personal identity undergoes challenge and transformation as a result of assuming a role during the performance.⁵⁶⁰ They do not discuss the imagery of the festival in any great depth, and neglect the role of fire

⁵⁶⁰ Tinsley and Matheson, "Layers of Passage," 150-151.

almost entirely. It is the contention of this chapter that fire is not incidental to the rites of passage found in the Beltane Fire Festival, or any other fire ritual. To varying degrees, fire is both the agent and expression of personal and communal transformation. Fire provides a sensory context for the social and personal transitions that take place at the Beltane Fire Festival, Stonehaven Fireball Ceremony, and Up-Helly-Aa — just as fire provides the ‘sensual context for the covenant’ in Exodus 3.⁵⁶¹ In each case, the ritual is contingent upon the presence of fire. The physicality of fire provides an immersive ritual encounter which facilitates bodily, emotional, and imaginative engagement with the ritual. It is through these affective qualities that the presence of fire generates liminality in both the physical and conceptual environment of the ritual.⁵⁶²

Hence, the presence of fire does more than simply delineate phases of the ritual. Fire, itself an ongoing process of transformation, embodies the transformative nature of the rite. The physical presence of fire calls for a response, since the sensory effects and potential threat of fire must be negotiated throughout the ritual. A response to ritualised fire constitutes a response to the rite. Within this response lies the possibility for change.⁵⁶³ Any changes that take place through engagement with the image of fire have the potential to be incorporated into the post-liminal self, where fire lives on in memory and imagination. For Geertz, the transformational nature of ritual results in a changed perspective on ‘the common-sense world’ as participants connect their ritual experience to their everyday existence.⁵⁶⁴ In this way, one’s heightened exposure to the multivalence of fire imagery in the ‘sacred’ sphere may inform one’s reception of the image in day-to-day life. Turner suggests that both individual participants and the community as a whole may add ‘new meanings’ to signifiers (i.e. symbols and images) as part of a private or collective hermeneutic.⁵⁶⁵

⁵⁶¹ Niditch, *Religion*, 37.

⁵⁶² For a comprehensive discussion of affect theory, see: Donovan O. Schaefer, *Religious Affects: Animality, Evolution, and Power* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015).

⁵⁶³ Thomassen, *Liminality*, 83.

⁵⁶⁴ Geertz, *Interpretation*, 122.

⁵⁶⁵ Turner, “Symbolic Studies,” 154.

As rites of passage, these fire rituals point to ways the image of fire may be applied for personal and communal change. Building on categories that presented themselves during Chapter 4, analysis of these events will be organised under the following headings: *communication and participation*; *purification and creative transformation*; and *fire as presence*. This structure will provide a way to meaningfully compare three diverse community celebrations, illustrating the multivalence of fire imagery in different ritual settings. First, fire imagery is used to communicate the core themes of the rituals, and to facilitate participation for both participants and observers. Second, each rite incorporates themes of purification, celebration, and transformation which are mediated by fire's destructive and creative nature. Finally, the very presence of fire can create an atmosphere which suggests the possibility of transcendental (or sacramental) experience. All of these observations run counter to any assumption that fire is unsuited to ceremonial or ritual use, or that it has lost its 'mythical content.'⁵⁶⁶ On the contrary, the multivalence of the fire imagery discussed below may open up possibilities for emotional and imaginative engagement in Christian ritual experiences.

Section 1: Stonehaven Fireball Ceremony & Beltane Fire Festival

Scotland hosts a variety of annual winter fire events, many of which take place at New Year in celebration of Hogmanay. Notable examples include the Burning of the Clavie at Burghead, the Comrie Flambeaux Procession, the bonfire at Biggar, and the Hogmanay torchlight procession in Edinburgh.⁵⁶⁷ I had the opportunity to attend two such fire rituals in 2016: the Stonehaven Fireball Ceremony in celebration of Hogmanay; and Edinburgh's Beltane Fire Festival, which marks the beginning of summer. The observations of this section are derived from attendance at these events, as well as primary sources produced by the organisers.⁵⁶⁸

⁵⁶⁶ Fernández-Galiano, *Fire and Memory*, 214.

⁵⁶⁷ Hole, "Winter Bonfires," 224-225. See also "Hogmanay and New Year in Scotland," VisitScotland, accessed 5 May 2018, <https://www.visitscotland.com/see-do/events/christmas-winter-festivals/hogmanay>.

⁵⁶⁸ Photographs and footage from my site visits are included in Appendices 2 and 3.

In Stonehaven, the tradition of swinging home-made fireballs in a Hogmanay procession dates back to at least 1908.⁵⁶⁹ The eponymous fireballs are made from flammable materials wrapped in several layers of chicken wire. They are loosely spherical in shape and of varying sizes, though each one takes some strength to swing. This is especially true when the fireballs are lit: air resistance increases with the flames. Before the ceremony, each fireball is doused in paraffin. The procession begins at the stroke of midnight, when the fireballs are lit from flaming bales and are paraded down the high street. Fireballs are customarily swung in an arc around the body on handles two to three feet long.⁵⁷⁰ At the end of the procession, when the fireballs are burning low or burned out, they are flung into the sea.⁵⁷¹

Held at the beginning of summer, Beltane is considered to be one of four Celtic rituals marking the cycle of seasons in pre-Christian Britain.⁵⁷² It is thought that in preparation for the Beltane celebration, all fires in the community were extinguished, ready to be lit anew from the newly-kindled 'neid fire' (or 'need-fire').⁵⁷³ The neid fire was at the centre of the Beltane celebrations, owing to its role as a sacred flame which would cleanse people and livestock for the coming year.⁵⁷⁴

When Edinburgh's Beltane Fire Festival was established in 1988, it was in response to the austere political and social climate of the time. It allowed for re-connection with nature, an expression of community, and uninhibited acts of celebration.⁵⁷⁵ The event is organised by the Beltane Fire Society, who describe the festival as 'a living, dynamic reinterpretation and

⁵⁶⁹ Martin Sim, "History," Stonehaven Fireballs Association, accessed 21 May 2016, <http://stonehavenfireballs.co.uk/history>.

⁵⁷⁰ Stonehaven Fireballs Association, *The Fireballs: Stonehaven New Year 2016 Programme* (Stonehaven: Stonehaven Fireballs Association, 2016), 17.

⁵⁷¹ The burned-out fireballs are retrieved from the harbour the following morning (Stonehaven Fireballs Association, *Programme*, 5).

⁵⁷² "A Detailed History of Beltane," Beltane Fire Society, accessed 28 May 2016, <https://beltane.org/a-detailed-history-of-beltane>.

⁵⁷³ Frazer, *Golden Bough*, chap. 62.

⁵⁷⁴ "History of Beltane."

⁵⁷⁵ Tinsley and Matheson, "Layers of Passage," 145.

modernisation' of ancient ritual practices.⁵⁷⁶ As well as lighting the neid fire, Edinburgh's modern Beltane dramatises the re-awakening of the May Queen (a personification of nature) and the death and rebirth of the Green Man (who represents life).⁵⁷⁷ Their journey towards unification is acted out in a procession with multiple stages, many of which involve dancing and fire performance. The May Queen is escorted by her court around Calton Hill, where she encounters other performance troupes who represent elements such as wind, water, earth, and (of course) fire. After the Green Man dies and is resurrected, he and the May Queen finally light the Beltane bonfire — the climax of the narrative.⁵⁷⁸

Fire is more than just a focal point in these seasonal rites of passage; it is an agent of change. Experiences of personal transformation occur through the liminal nature of these events. The Stonehaven Fireball Ceremony and Edinburgh Beltane Fire Festival provide liminal experiences through subverting familiar spaces and structures, and immersing participants in imagery that points to the transformation of personal or communal reality.⁵⁷⁹ They are also 'rites of passage' in that they signal the passage of one time or season to another, a transition which may also be reflected in a participant's personal life.⁵⁸⁰ I will consider the ways in which fire provides various points of imaginative engagement through its multivalence, and argue that the liminal space created by both rituals is heavily mediated by the presence of fire.

⁵⁷⁶ "About Beltane Fire Festival," Beltane Fire Society, accessed 24 May 2016, <https://beltane.org/about/about-beltane>.

⁵⁷⁷ "Beltane 2016 Court," Beltane Fire Society, accessed 24 May 2016, <https://beltane.org/beltane-2016-court>.

⁵⁷⁸ "Beltane 2016 Map and Running Order," Beltane Fire Society, accessed 24 May 2016, <https://beltane.org/beltane-2016-map-and-running-order>.

⁵⁷⁹ Tinsley and Matheson, "Layers of Passage," 141-142.

⁵⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 141.

1.1 Communication and Participation

The seasonal fire rituals conducted at Stonehaven Fireball Ceremony and Beltane Fire Festival both convey aspects of communal identity. Both rituals have grown out of the local community and are organised by community groups. At Stonehaven, residents take on the legacy of their forebears and ensure the Fireball Ceremony runs another year. Those who swing the fireballs ('swingers') express their identity as people who live locally and are invested in the town's heritage.⁵⁸¹ Building and swinging fireballs is a creative act which invites a certain amount of personal expression within the official guidelines. The Beltane Fire Festival goes even further, allowing participants to engage in improvisational performance art around a central narrative. Each group of performers takes on a different set of characteristics. Members of the group are bound together through costume, common character traits, and their relationship to the fire.⁵⁸² Individuals locate themselves within the mythic cosmology of earth, spirits, and fire. They also align themselves with the wider concerns of the festival, which may communicate counter-cultural sentiments and a nostalgic desire to recover spirituality, sensuality, and connections with nature in a post-industrial society.⁵⁸³

For the crowds which come to observe the fire rituals, the line between spectating and participating is continually blurred. This is our first indication of the liminal space suggested by Tinsley and Matheson in their study of the Edinburgh Beltane Fire Festival.⁵⁸⁴ As indicated above, their interpretive model can also be applied to other fire performances, including the Stonehaven Fireball Ceremony. Fire performances are already unusual and subversive due to a heavy focus on naked flames, which elsewhere are deemed too hazardous except in their most controlled form.⁵⁸⁵ Spectators cannot easily distance themselves from the heat and sound of the flames, or from their illumination — at the Beltane Fire Festival,

⁵⁸¹ Stonehaven Fireballs Association, *Programme*, 18.

⁵⁸² "Beltane Audience Experience," Beltane Fire Society, accessed 24 May 2016, <https://beltane.org/beltane-audience-experience>.

⁵⁸³ Tinsley and Matheson, "Layers of Passage," 145.

⁵⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 141-158.

⁵⁸⁵ Discussed in Chapter 3.

with a few exceptions, fire is the only light by which to see. The potential danger of burning materials calls for constant vigilance even from those in the crowd, as a stray spark can land anywhere.⁵⁸⁶ In addition, spectators often have their own reasons for attending beyond being entertained, including (but not limited to) the pursuit of a spiritual experience or the desire for ‘escape’ from the demands of daily life.⁵⁸⁷ The Beltane Fire Festival offers various forms of emotional and sensory engagement, and deliberately breaks down the barriers between participants and audience.⁵⁸⁸ Fire takes on different roles in these celebrations, and its multivalence means there is more than one way of engaging with the ritual’s fire imagery.

Stonehaven Fireball Ceremony

The Stonehaven Fireball Ceremony emerged as an annual Hogmanay custom informed by the town’s community life and identity. It was carried forward through the years thanks to the collective memory of local people, who simply ‘knew what to do and what went on’ during the ritual.⁵⁸⁹ Organisation was later formalised through the Stonehaven Fireballs Association, who are responsible for the running and safety of the event. Formerly, only those born in Stonehaven’s Old Town were permitted to swing at the ceremony; now participation is open to anyone who lives in the Stonehaven area and is committed to the event.⁵⁹⁰ More women have been involved in recent years, though only twelve of forty-three swingers were female in the 2015/16 event.⁵⁹¹ Many swingers are recognisable to local spectators, who vocalise their support during the procession with cheers and exhortations (or light-hearted jibes).⁵⁹² Despite its thousands of visitors from all over the world, the

⁵⁸⁶ Author’s observations from site visits: Stonehaven Fireball Ceremony on 1 January 2016; Beltane Fire Festival on 30 April 2016.

⁵⁸⁷ Catherine M. Matheson, Russell Rimmer, and Ross Tinsley, “Spiritual attitudes and visitor motivations at the Beltane Fire Festival, Edinburgh,” *Tourism Management* 44 (2014): 16; 29, accessed 13 April 2018, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2014.01.023>.

⁵⁸⁸ “Beltane Audience Experience.”

⁵⁸⁹ Stonehaven Fireballs Association, *Programme*, 18.

⁵⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁵⁹² Author’s observations.

Stonehaven Fireball Ceremony remains a local event, conducted and appreciated by members of the community.

The crowd generates an energetic atmosphere as they gather for the night's festivities, and their involvement runs deeper than merely cheering from the sidelines.⁵⁹³ People travel to the Stonehaven Fireball Ceremony to participate in an experience that is not available anywhere else or at any other time of year. Spectators express amazement, excitement, and encouragement for each swinger during the event.⁵⁹⁴ Admission is free of charge and open to all (including non-residents). In recent years, the ceremony has attracted around 15,000 visitors each Hogmanay — a few thousand more than Stonehaven's entire population.⁵⁹⁵

In the environmentally-conscious modern fireball ritual, swingers must select their materials from an approved list of 'clean' fuels which release little smoke and combust free of dangerous toxins.⁵⁹⁶ Permissible materials include newspaper, kindling, wood, cardboard, cotton rags, pine cones, coal, and unwanted clothing.⁵⁹⁷ Provided they adhere to the stated regulations, however, swingers are invited to build their fireballs in their own way, using 'their own recipe.'⁵⁹⁸ In this way, there is room for individual expression and creativity within community structures. Even within the safety limitations, no two fireballs will ever be identical. Swingers convene a month or so prior to the ceremony, providing a social setting in which to construct their fireballs alongside other participants. Building a fireball is an act of creation which requires time, energy, and personal investment to prepare for the event.

Individuality and creativity is expressed not only in the building of the fireball, but in the swinging as well. Swinging requires strength, stamina, and concentration. It is a thoroughly engaging exercise for the swingers, who each swing in their own way and with their own

⁵⁹³ Author's observations.

⁵⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁹⁵ Stonehaven Fireballs Association, *Programme*, 19.

⁵⁹⁶ Ibid., *Programme*, 18.

⁵⁹⁷ Ibid., 5.

⁵⁹⁸ Martin Sim, "What is 'The Fireballs Ceremony'?" Stonehaven Fireballs Association, accessed 21 May 2016, <http://stonehavenfireballs.co.uk/about>.

rhythm.⁵⁹⁹ Some pause along the way to please the crowd, while others choose not to stop until their fireball is safely extinguished in the sea.⁶⁰⁰ Each swinger's journey is personal but not isolated. As a firmly-established local tradition, many experience a sense of solidarity with those who have enacted the same ceremony for more than one hundred years.⁶⁰¹ Everyone in the procession ignites their fireball from the same lighting point: two burning bales kindled for the purpose.⁶⁰² The swingers prepare together and process together, one after another, and the ceremony only comes to an end when the last person completes their swinging.⁶⁰³ The completion of the ceremony is marked by an impressive fireworks display which lights up the harbour, much to the delight of the crowd.

After the final cheers have died down, the thousands of spectators slowly begin to disperse. Now, the crowd itself must follow the same route the swingers did during the first leg of their journey: down the high street in their own impromptu, disorganised procession.⁶⁰⁴ The sense of community does not end abruptly at the end of the ceremony but gradually as people disperse — at first together, as a body of people who have seen in the new year as one congregation; and then separately, as each one filters out of the high street and on to their own individual destination.

Beltane Fire Festival

The Beltane Fire Festival takes place every year on Calton Hill, in the heart of Edinburgh city centre. The festival is staged by the Beltane Fire Society, a non-profit organisation dedicated to reviving and reimagining four seasonal Celtic celebrations. These are Beltane, celebrating the beginning of summer; Samhuinn, marking the arrival of winter (and the Celtic New Year) on 31st October; Imbolc, which falls on Candlemas and signals the start of

⁵⁹⁹ Author's observations.

⁶⁰⁰ Ibid.

⁶⁰¹ Stonehaven Fireballs Association, *Programme*, 18.

⁶⁰² Author's observations. See photographs in Appendix 2.1 and 2.2.

⁶⁰³ See photograph in Appendix 2.3. Footage of fireball swinging is available in Appendix 2.4 and 2.5.

⁶⁰⁴ Author's observations.

spring; and Lughnasadh, a harvest festival observed in early August.⁶⁰⁵ Society membership is not contingent upon long-term residence in the community, and the society welcomes students and international visitors who are staying temporarily in the city.⁶⁰⁶ Rather than local heritage, the criteria for membership is active participation, and individuals become eligible to join the Beltane Fire Society through their voluntary involvement in Beltane or Samhuinn.⁶⁰⁷ This allows for collaboration between diverse individuals of varying ages, nationalities, and walks of life. Far from being a homogenous neo-pagan group, the Beltane Fire Society does not officially associate with any religious worldview and allows room for practitioners of all faiths and none.⁶⁰⁸

The Beltane Fire Festival is an evolving ritual event shaped by continual input from the society's members.⁶⁰⁹ The Beltane Fire Society's website describes Beltane as 'a central focus for our community, bringing many many people together [sic]' over the years since the festival's inception.⁶¹⁰ The festival has grown from its modest beginnings, now attracting around 300 society members as volunteers.⁶¹¹ Recent performances of the festival have attracted audiences of between six and twelve thousand.⁶¹² As the society's biggest event of the year, Beltane provides a dynamic setting in which to explore intersections of identity and experience. Such explorations occur through an intricate matrix of performances which are organised around a central narrative and shaped by personal creativity and expression.

⁶⁰⁵ See respective event pages located on the Beltane Fire Society website, accessed 24 May 2016, <https://beltane.org>.

⁶⁰⁶ Tinsley and Matheson, "Layers of Passage," 149.

⁶⁰⁷ "About Beltane Fire Society," Beltane Fire Society, accessed 24 May 2016, <https://beltane.org/about>.

⁶⁰⁸ Tinsley and Matheson, "Layers of Passage," 153-4.

⁶⁰⁹ Tinsley and Matheson, "Layers of Passage," 152. An overview of the 'evolution' of the festival are presented in Catherine M. Matheson and Ross Tinsley, "The carnivalesque and event evolution: A study of the Beltane Fire Festival," *Leisure Studies*, 35, no. 1 (2016): 1-27, accessed 13 April 2018, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02614367.2014.962591>.

⁶¹⁰ "About Beltane Fire Festival."

⁶¹¹ Tinsley and Matheson, "Layers of Passage," 146; "History of Beltane."

⁶¹² "History of Beltane."

The story of Beltane is told using performance art, with drumming, improvisation, and physical theatre in prominent use throughout the night.⁶¹³ The festival narrates the journey of the May Queen as she awakens from her winter slumber and assembles the elemental spirits of nature in order to bring summer forth. The May Queen is the deified personification of the earth in its summer season, an aspect of the neo-pagan Goddess. When she awakes, she finds herself estranged from her counterpart, the Green Man, who has yet to complete his transformation into his summer guise. The Green Man is ‘the foliate form’ of the masculine deity, also known as the Horned God.⁶¹⁴ The festival draws upon neo-pagan figures and folklore for inspiration, and neo-paganism’s feminine and masculine deities take the festival’s leading roles. In folklore, the Green Man is generally depicted as a leafy woodland figure, but during the Beltane Fire Festival the Green Man is conceived of as ‘the flame that animates and moves all living things.’⁶¹⁵ Beltane is the time during which the Horned God ‘is fully restored to his lusty, fertile, jovial self, the Green Man...’⁶¹⁶ To achieve this new state of being, he must be reconciled with the powers of nature, represented by his ultimate marital union with the May Queen.

The Green Man is a potent source of creative and destructive energy. The performer who took on the Green Man’s role in the 2016 festival observed: ‘Like a fire, [the Green Man] is in a constant dance of change, and like a fire, he is immaterial when distanced from the Earth, his consort, the Goddess.’⁶¹⁷ However, the Green Man’s resistance to change threatens to destroy the life he should be helping to create. In his desperate attempt to avoid the death of his winter self, his energy becomes chaotic and explosive. Eventually, the Green Man is struck by an epiphany: to spare the world his violent impulses, he must turn his destructive nature inwards and sacrifice himself. The image of fire, which may also create or destroy, helps communicate the volatile energy of the Green Man on the brink of his transformation.

⁶¹³ Author’s observations.

⁶¹⁴ Ashleen O’Gaea, *Celebrating the Seasons of Life: Lore, Rituals, Activities and Symbols* (New Page Books: Franklin Lakes, 2005), 52.

⁶¹⁵ “Beltane 2016 Court.”

⁶¹⁶ O’Gaea, *Seasons*, 28.

⁶¹⁷ “Beltane 2016 Court.”

After the death of the Green Man, the May Queen summons the earth's energy to resurrect him. The Green Man is revived, having gone through a kenotic process: he has surrendered his will and emptied himself of his all-consuming desire to preserve his own life in winter stasis. The Green Man is finally ready to unite with the May Queen, and the creative energy of earth and fire combine to produce the potential for summer's bounty.⁶¹⁸ The Beltane bonfire is lit to symbolise and celebrate the continuation of life for another year.

At Beltane, each performer chooses the extent of their interaction with the audience and the degree of their contact with fire. Performers construct their own costumes, choose their performance styles, and decide whether they wish to perform in a choreographed or predominantly improvisational manner.⁶¹⁹ Some performers have no direct contact with fire in their performances, whilst others are almost constantly handling live flames. For instance, those who act as Torchbearers construct their own fire apparatus which they then carry throughout the festival.⁶²⁰ Some groups even build fire apparatus into their costumes.⁶²¹ Like the swingers building their own fireballs at Stonehaven, Beltane fire performers are able to invest their technical and creative skills in fashioning their equipment. Before and during the festival, individuals take time and effort to craft their appearance, performance skills, and a unique persona appropriate to their place in the narrative.⁶²² It is difficult to determine where the performer's identity ends and the character begins.

In 2016, four groups represented the cardinal elements in fixed locations on Calton Hill, designated Air Point, Water Point, Earth Point, and Fire Point. Others were roaming groups: the Aerie, heavenly messengers; the Beasties, earthly drummers; the Reds, who embody a chaotic (and fiery) instinct for life; and the Whites, who protected the May Queen during her journey. At the head of the procession, the Blues also held organisational responsibility as

⁶¹⁸ "Beltane 2016 court."

⁶¹⁹ "Beltane 2016 Group Info," Beltane Fire Society, accessed 24 May 2016, <https://beltane.org/beltane-2016-group-info>.

⁶²⁰ "Group Info."

⁶²¹ Ibid. Integrating fire into costumes is particularly associated with the 'Nomadic Flame' group.

⁶²² Tinsley and Matheson, "Layers of Passage," 150-1.

‘elders’ and custodians of the society’s Beltane tradition.⁶²³ Torchbearers, the lighters of the neid fire, carried its flame throughout the procession.⁶²⁴ Meanwhile, the Nomadic Flame group wandered the hill with flames in search of a home. Yet more fire performers curated the Fire Arch, the threshold to the underworld. The Bower group cultivated a hearth through storytelling and hospitality around the neid fire.⁶²⁵

Each of these groups’ performances combined to form the festival as a whole, and each year the number and nature of the groups present differs. Co-operation between groups and individuals is essential, both in performance and in organising the logistics of the event. Volunteers are required to overcome any interpersonal tensions within and between groups to ensure the ritual comes together.⁶²⁶ The Beltane drama, in which discord resolves into unity, thus operates on two levels: in the narrative, and in the community. Like the elemental characters they portray, disparate groups of volunteers must join together in order to successfully carry the fire on its journey to ultimately ignite the Beltane bonfire.

The festival’s ‘stage’ on Calton Hill is common land and a familiar outdoor space to many. Fire is the primary source of light on the hill after the festival starts, at sunset. Apart from floodlights at one or two key locations, nothing can be seen without the glow of fire. The audience navigates the space by pursuing the flames of the procession or seeking out other performance spaces made visible by firelight.⁶²⁷ From the brow of the hill, the panoramic view of the city keeps the festival firmly located in its wider geographical setting.⁶²⁸ Hence, the otherworldly tale of Beltane does not occur disconnected from the city. Instead, it occurs at the meeting between two worlds. It is not quite one world or the other, but somewhere in between — liminal space. The audience is invited to glimpse a world of

⁶²³ “Beltane 2016 Blues,” Beltane Fire Society, accessed 24 May 2016, <https://beltane.org/beltane-2016-blues>.

⁶²⁴ See footage in Appendix 3.4.

⁶²⁵ “Group Info.”

⁶²⁶ Tinsley and Matheson, “Layers of Passage,” 155.

⁶²⁷ Author’s observations.

⁶²⁸ Ibid.

spirits and deities even as their physical location grounds them in the familiar environment of Edinburgh city centre.

Within the open spaces of Calton Hill, there are few tangible boundaries between performers and the audience: 'Beltane Fire Festival is presented as "investigative theatre"; set outdoors and with no physical curtains or barriers.'⁶²⁹ Calton Hill is a site which contains some distinctive monuments, including the unfinished National Monument of Scotland, also called the 'Acropolis' for its row of neoclassical columns.⁶³⁰ The 'Acropolis' plays a significant role in the staging of Beltane, especially in providing a mythic backdrop to the opening scenes of the festival. The space behind the 'Acropolis,' known as the Bower, serves as a preparatory space for lighting the neid fire and the end point of the night's procession.⁶³¹ In front, a grassy plateau is the location around which the audience await the first appearance of the fire and the emergence of the May Queen.

As the torchlit procession winds its way around the hill, the performers pause at different stations to narrate different parts of the Beltane story, often using fire. Fire is the primary and indispensable means of communication at the Beltane Fire Festival. The multivalent imagery of fire makes fire particularly suited to the themes of the festival due to its range of destructive, creative, and transformative associations. Fire is associated with the movement and progress of the procession: neid fire is lit, and the procession begins; the fire passes, and the spectators follow. Fire, with all its associated risks, is suited to communicating the dangers of the uncontrolled, chaotic energy which is unleashed by the Green Man. At other times in the performance, however, fire is used to convey balance and harmony. The performance implies that, when its power is properly directed, fire can be a source of warmth, purification, and unity. This is seen through the imagery of the ceremonial neid fire as a hearth, as well as the resurrection of the Green Man, which restores order to the elements. Fire is used by different groups for different purposes: to provide guiding light, to bring mischief, to communicate threat, to celebrate the elements, to provide a ceremonial

⁶²⁹ "What to Expect at Beltane," Beltane Fire Society, accessed 24 May 2016, <https://beltane.org/beltane-audience-experience>.

⁶³⁰ See Appendix 3.1 for a photograph of the 'Acropolis.'

⁶³¹ "Running Order."

gathering point, and so on. The many sides of fire merge into a unified whole when the two opposing deities (and all that they represent) are united in the Beltane bonfire.

1.2 Purification and Creative Transformation

One of the hallmarks of liminal experience is the occurrence of ‘transition.’⁶³² This may be seasonal transition, as in the arrival of the new year at Hogmanay or the welcoming of summer at Beltane. It may also be a personal or communal transition from one state to another: from younger to older, from outsider to community member, from profane to cleansed. In rites of passage such as those at Stonehaven Fireball Ceremony and Beltane Fire Festival, there is always scope for temporal, personal, or social transformation. Fire is not required for transformation to take place, but it is uniquely suited to symbolising this layer of the ritual. Through the converting process of combustion, the image of fire signals the possibility of change. It hints at the removal of those things which cannot survive the fire, and the renewal of whatever emerges intact. Fire helps designate the space ‘sacred’ — that is, set apart for a ritual purpose.⁶³³ Simply encountering fire marks a difference from everyday experience, and its otherness defamiliarises common spaces. The play of light, shadow, smell, and heat gives the immediate environment a distinct look and feel. A new world is available under the influence of fire; or rather, our own world is transformed.

Stonehaven Fireball Ceremony

At Stonehaven, transformation starts with safety measures. In preparation for the event, the Old Town high street is lined with barriers to separate spectators from orbiting fireballs and stray droplets of burning paraffin. The centre of the road is reserved for the staging of the ceremony, including the marching pipe bands and drummers who provide entertainment in the run-up to midnight. The high street’s usual function is temporarily set aside for a different purpose, transforming the familiar location into a stage for the yearly procession. The change is not only in the high street’s function, but in how people experience the space. The paraffin used to help the fireballs burn brings the powerful smell of accelerant to the

⁶³² Tinsley and Matheson, “Layers of Passage,” 142.

⁶³³ Tinsley and Matheson, “Layers of Passage,” 142. See also: Turner, “Frame,” 468.

harbour end of the high street.⁶³⁴ The fireballs illuminate the stonework of the surrounding houses and cast unpredictable shadows. The air is filled with the chatter and cheer of the crowd — the sounds of 15,000 people or more — and the distinctive whirling roar of the fireballs as they swing.⁶³⁵ When the fireballs pass, they punctuate the icy midnight chill with a wave of intense heat.⁶³⁶

The ceremony marks the shift from one calendar year to the next. The fireball procession does not begin until the clock tower has struck midnight, so it cannot be in *anticipation* of the date change; neither is it a celebration of what has gone before. It is a forward-looking ceremony that ‘[helps] to speed the Old Year on its way and to herald in the New in ancient style with a highly dexterous performance.’⁶³⁷ More than mere entertainment, however, the fireball ceremony accesses imagery of destruction and purification to become a ritual of change. Together, the town and its visitors pass from one year to the next. The ritual takes a time of transition for the community and frames it within a collective desire to dispense with the old in hope of a better year to come. As the fire burns away the old rags and materials in the fireballs, so things from the former year also pass away.

The symbolism of destruction and renewal remains central to the interpretation of the ceremony provided by Stonehaven Fireballs Association, who locate the likely origins of the ritual in local ‘superstition’ designed to ensure the safety of fishermen for the coming year.⁶³⁸ Historically, fireballs were filled with broken nets, rope, and other fishing equipment.⁶³⁹ Of course, these materials were also items that were on-hand and disposable in a fishing village such as Stonehaven, but it is notable that materials that could cause difficulty at sea were ritually burned at the turn of the year. Assuming the Association’s theory is correct, burning such items both removes them and purifies the community of their effects. Even if the

⁶³⁴ Author’s observations.

⁶³⁵ Ibid.

⁶³⁶ Ibid.

⁶³⁷ Martin Sim, “When is the Fireballs Ceremony?” Stonehaven Fireballs Association, accessed 21 May 2016, <http://stonehavenfireballs.co.uk/when>.

⁶³⁸ Stonehaven Fireballs Association, *Programme*, 18; Sim, “What is ‘The Fireballs Ceremony’?”

⁶³⁹ Stonehaven Fireballs Association, *Programme*, 17.

history is not accurate, it remains the governing narrative of the event. As the introduction to the 2016 programme reads: ‘The Fireballs ceremony is said to burn away any bad spirits and negativity from the year and cleanse a path into the new year.’⁶⁴⁰ The language of cleansing is explicit.

The imagery of cleansing is not restricted to spirits and good luck. The ceremony functions on a psychological level as well. As the fire consumes the physical materials within the fireballs, the symbolism of destruction and purification is extended to individual and community life. Where mementoes are included in the fire, the cleansing takes on a more directly personal dimension. The 2016 programme notes that some swingers include ‘a reminder of a bad event from the previous year’ in their fireballs — a reminder which is submitted to the flames during the ceremony.⁶⁴¹ Fire’s destruction represents a desirable cathartic process, by which participants invest their own need for emotional renewal in the ritual. In one archived update, the event’s website reflects on the personal motivations of participants who were keen to use the ceremony to cleanse themselves of the past:

There were quite a few swingers and spectators who were [at the ceremony] for very personal reasons. They were wanting 2011 to be well and trully [*sic*] burned out as it had not been the best of years for them. Lets [*sic*] hope for them and all of us 2012 is a better year.⁶⁴²

Fire burns away the old. In doing so, it provides space for participants to embark on the new year with restored optimism. They are provided with an opportunity to move out from under the shadow of the previous year’s struggles and choose to embrace a fresh start.

The cleansing of fire meets the cleansing of water at the end of the ceremony, when the fireballs are doused in the sea. The extinguishing of the fireballs in the harbour stands as a later addition to the ritual.⁶⁴³ Before this, fireballs were left to burn out gradually on their own. Safety concerns eventually gave rise to a more climactic end to the procession. The

⁶⁴⁰ Stonehaven Fireballs Association, *Programme*, 3.

⁶⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁶⁴² Archived blog post from 1 January 2012, Stonehaven Fireballs Association website, accessed 23 May 2016, <http://stonehavenfireballs.co.uk>.

⁶⁴³ Sim, “History.” This point is noted under the 1994 summary.

image is no less striking for its pragmatism. The action gestures towards finality; the dousing of the flames cannot be reversed. By giving the ritual a definitive end-point, organisers emphasise the completion of the ceremony and point towards fresh beginnings. Those who wish to dispense of the past year are offered closure. A new year is ushered in, untainted by previous experience and with the promise of new life and potentiality.

Much like Best's *Temple*, the ceremony uses the multivalence of fire to open up possibilities of purification and transformation for participants and spectators alike. The sensory transformation of the high street and harbour suggest the possibility of change in one's own life or seeing one's circumstances in new perspective. The fireballs' brilliance in the darkness of the Scottish winter seems to prophetically declare new hope in dark times. As the first, spectacular act of the new year, the ritual expresses the manifold hopes and desires of those who gather to experience the flames.

Beltane Fire Festival

The story enacted during the Beltane Fire Festival is also one of change, cleansing, and metamorphosis. Upon entering the Fire Arch, the May Queen's procession undergoes ritual purification as they begin their journey.⁶⁴⁴ Later, the Green Man is cleansed of his unruly desires through his self-sacrifice and resurrection, which leave him with pure intentions compatible with those of the May Queen. In these moments of heightened drama, the procession encounters the threshold between life and death.⁶⁴⁵ Together, the personified forces of nature channel their creative energies into the new life which constitutes the turning of the seasons.

The Beltane bonfire celebrates the reconciliation of the May Queen and the Green Man, and the rebirth of summer.⁶⁴⁶ The festival reapplies traditional symbols of fertility and sexual union to evoke artistic as well as biological fecundity.⁶⁴⁷ According to popular

⁶⁴⁴ Tinsley and Matheson, "Layers of Passage," 150.

⁶⁴⁵ "A purifying force – types of fire at Beltane Fire Festival," Beltane Fire Society, last modified 22 April 2018, <https://beltane.org/2018/04/22/a-purifying-force-types-of-fire-at-beltane-fire-festival>.

⁶⁴⁶ "Purifying force."

⁶⁴⁷ "About Beltane Fire Festival."

understandings of the Celtic tradition, the community's old ash-ridden fires would be replaced by flames that symbolised purification, healing, good fortune, and fertility.⁶⁴⁸ Beltane here draws upon solar imagery, with the bonfire representing the increased warmth, energy and sustenance the new season brings. The Beltane bonfire would 'recall the growing power of the sun and provide an opportunity to cleanse and renew the conditions of [the] community,' including livestock.⁶⁴⁹ After the ritual the fire was kept alive in the hearth of each home, a shared symbol of community connection for the coming seasons.

Participants of the modern Beltane Fire Festival do not take the fire home with them, but the Beltane Fire Society continues to acknowledge the connectivity of the Beltane fire.⁶⁵⁰ At the Bower, a 'hearth' awaits all those who wish to remain after the close of the procession. They are offered sustenance, warmth, and hospitality. The hearth is envisioned as a place of protection and safety.⁶⁵¹ Additionally, all areas of Calton Hill that are accessible during the festival share the potential to serve as locations for personal and communal ritual experiences, and the entire site is treated as sacred. Prior to the festival, Beltane volunteers conduct site visits to Calton Hill in order to familiarise themselves with the terrain and to rehearse. Some of these visits also involve preparatory rituals 'of opening, blessing and protection' at key locations around the hill, such as the Bower.⁶⁵² In this way, fire enters the ritual environment in an orderly, ceremonial fashion rather than violently or chaotically. At the same time, Calton Hill undergoes an active process of sanctification to make it a suitable space for the sanctifying fire of the festival.

These preparatory rituals reflect the organisers' deliberate attempt to transform the site not only in the short term (i.e., for the night of the festival) but also in a lasting way. Since the early days of the festival, the Beltane Fire Society have sought to 'reclaim' Calton Hill

⁶⁴⁸ "About Beltane Fire Festival."

⁶⁴⁹ "History of Beltane." See also Frazer, *Golden Bough*, chap. 63.

⁶⁵⁰ "History of Beltane."

⁶⁵¹ "These groups are still recruiting... for now!" Beltane Fire Society, last modified 13 March 2013, <https://beltane.org/2013/03/13/these-groups-are-still-recruiting-for-now>.

⁶⁵² "Opening the Bower," Beltane Fire Society, last modified 25 March 2014, <https://beltane.org/2014/03/25/opening-the-bower>.

from its former reputation ‘as a “no go” area of the city.’⁶⁵³ They have done this by demonstrating the site’s suitability for community events even after dark. Over the years, the celebration of the Beltane Fire Festival has drawn favourable attention to Calton Hill as a venue for internationally-renowned performance art.⁶⁵⁴ Some years after the Beltane Fire Festival was established, the Scottish Indian Arts Forum chose Calton Hill for the annual celebration of Dussehra, a Hindu festival which uses 25ft burning effigies and fireworks to memorialise the triumph of good over evil.⁶⁵⁵ While there may have been other influential factors in the rise of Calton Hill’s popularity, it is also clear that fire festivals have established it as a viable location for experiencing the sacred.

The Beltane Fire Festival contains multiple journeys of transition: some of them narrative, many of them experiential. As the festival starts, the kindling of the neid fire causes the transition from darkness to light and from anticipation to action. Until this moment, the audience has been gathering around the ‘Acropolis,’ with thousands of people pressing together in the hope of seeing the fire. The experience is one of compression, tension, and uncertainty.⁶⁵⁶ The neid fire is not always lit on schedule, being dependent on sunset and the onset of dusk; and so the eventual appearance of fire brings excitement and relief.⁶⁵⁷ As the procession leaves the ‘Acropolis,’ the crowd disperses and free movement over the hill is restored. The May Queen and her entourage proceed on their journey, during which they face moments of conflict and unity between various personified aspects of nature.⁶⁵⁸

⁶⁵³ “About Beltane Fire Festival.”

⁶⁵⁴ “History of Beltane.”

⁶⁵⁵ “Dussehra Festival effigies light up Calton Hill,” *Edinburgh Evening News*, 6 October 2014, <http://www.edinburghnews.scotsman.com/news/dussehra-festival-effigies-light-up-calton-hill-1-3563722>. More information available at <http://scottishindianartsforum.co.uk>.

⁶⁵⁶ Author’s observations.

⁶⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵⁸ A visual illustration of the narrative is available on the Beltane Fire Festival website: “The Narrative of Beltane 2018 – in Photos,” Beltane Fire Society, last modified 25 April 2018, <https://beltane.org/2018/04/25/the-narrative-of-beltane-2018-in-photos>.

The presence of fire at the 'Acropolis' integrates the uninitiated into the ritual. At the 2016 event, a performer welcomed the crowd at the beginning of the night and encouraged their participation, validating the audience's presence as a meaningful contribution to the ritual.⁶⁵⁹ The performer explained that members of the audience are the 'witnesses' of the festival.⁶⁶⁰ The audience fulfil their role as witnesses by immersing themselves physically and imaginatively in the Beltane narrative. The audience, too, become actors with a role to play. Their most crucial tasks relate to the ritualised fire. They are called upon to will the neid fire into being; to encounter fire in its various forms and expressions around Calton Hill; and, in the final stage of the ritual, to bear witness to the birth of a new season in the Beltane bonfire.

Adopting a ritual persona can become a 'catalyst' for personal change.⁶⁶¹ For performers at the Beltane Fire Festival, transition begins with the outward process of applying costuming and body paint, and the inward process of constructing a persona. It is common for performers to enter a 'ritual state' of being, adopting behaviours and body language which indicate their identity as belonging to the Beltane narrative.⁶⁶² This temporary re-imagining of identity can continue to influence a performer's construction of self even after the ritual is concluded, as they incorporate aspects of that experience into everyday life.⁶⁶³ An organiser from the 2016 Beltane Fire Festival explained how, through the suspension of personal identity, she was able to explore aspects of personality, physicality, and behaviour she may not have otherwise experienced:

⁶⁵⁹ Author's observations.

⁶⁶⁰ "About Beltane Fire Society."

⁶⁶¹ Tinsley and Matheson, "Layers of Passage," 150.

⁶⁶² *Ibid.*, 151.

⁶⁶³ *Ibid.*

...Other years I remember most for the physical challenge: like Red, which changed forever my attitude towards my body by making it seem useful to me rather than a cumbersome and problematic brain transportation device, or the Whites, which really helped me explore my feelings about becoming a mother in a supported and peace-giving way. [...] When the last of your body paint finally washes off, new friendships remain indelibly imprinted beneath.⁶⁶⁴

In this case, the participant has experienced integration of parts of her ritual persona into her post-liminal identity. Audience members, too, may also undergo temporary and/or lasting change. For some, participation in the Beltane Fire Festival is an act of ‘spiritual exploration’ and self-reflection.⁶⁶⁵ The expectant atmosphere and ritualised environment make the festival rich in potential for those seeking new experiences.⁶⁶⁶ The performed rites of passage resonate with those already in personal states of transition, and the Beltane Fire Festival functions as an ‘outlet’ for those struggling to process change, and who need a reassuring environment in which to do so.⁶⁶⁷ The ritual and communal setting provides the opportunity for an individual to explore emotions and ideas related to change, knowing that they do so as part of a wider community. During the festival, imagery relating to personal transformation is instantly available — explicitly, through the narrative performances; and implicitly, through engagement with ritual symbols and their associations. As the governing image of the ritual, fire forms the focus for the festival’s symbolism of change.

The imagery of the Beltane Fire Festival centres around ‘casting off the darkness and celebrating the light.’⁶⁶⁸ This is done not at sunrise, as might also be fitting for a symbolic embrace of light, but at sunset.⁶⁶⁹ Sunlight gives way to darkness, but during the festival the darkness itself is transformed by fire. The transition from day to night radically affects the

⁶⁶⁴ “A Wave from Water Point,” Beltane Fire Society, 22 April 2016, <https://beltane.org/2016/04/22/a-wave-from-water-point>.

⁶⁶⁵ Tinsley and Matheson, “Layers of Passage,” 150.

⁶⁶⁶ Matheson, Rimmer, and Tinsley, “Spiritual attitudes,” 24-25.

⁶⁶⁷ Tinsley and Matheson, “Layers of Passage,” 156.

⁶⁶⁸ “About Beltane Fire Festival.”

⁶⁶⁹ Certain Easter rituals take place at dawn to celebrate the return of ‘the Light of Christ.’ See Chapter 6.

immediate environment, and forms the backdrop for other transitions that may take place throughout the festival. As the light fades, the atmosphere on the hill gradually changes.⁶⁷⁰ The landscape of the hill becomes less navigable as the declining visibility makes the uneven ground treacherous. The familiar hillside becomes profoundly alien after dark, such that it is easy for even seasoned audience members to become disorientated as they move between performance spaces.⁶⁷¹ The bright movement of fire delineates space within the homogenising darkness. Hence, fire takes on a revelatory function which allows participants to access the ritual narrative. Audience members who wish to depart from the procession must cross a cold void between one group of performers and the next.⁶⁷² Individuals are thus discouraged from moving out of ritual space. Fire separates dark from light. As a feature of Beltane performance space it signals creativity, warmth, and dynamism. Fire transforms the inert and obscuring darkness to create islands of sensate and revealing light. It is an overwhelmingly inviting image of creativity and revelation.⁶⁷³

Due to the improvisational nature of the performance, there is a degree of unpredictability to each year's festival. This fact is compounded by a high turnover of Beltane volunteers who 'bring with them fresh influences and ideas' through which they present the core Beltane narrative.⁶⁷⁴ Even visitors who have attended many times before approach the event somewhat 'in the dark,' as it were — knowing only the core features of the characters, procession, and key pieces of apparatus such as the Fire Arch.⁶⁷⁵ The story of the May Queen and Green Man provides a unifying framework within which other, more spontaneous performances may hang together.⁶⁷⁶ Similarly, fire is a core feature around which people and

⁶⁷⁰ Author's observations.

⁶⁷¹ Ibid.

⁶⁷² Ibid.

⁶⁷³ Ibid.

⁶⁷⁴ "Beltane Fire Festival," Edinburgh Festival Guide, accessed 28 May 2018, <http://edinburghfestivalguide.co.uk/festival/beltane-fire-festival>.

⁶⁷⁵ "Beltane Audience Experience." See photograph in Appendix 3.3, and footage of the Fire Arch alight in Appendix 3.6.

⁶⁷⁶ "History of Beltane."

performances move in complex and often unplanned ways.⁶⁷⁷ Although members of the public are not permitted to handle flames, they are continuously invited to participate through imaginative and sensory engagement.⁶⁷⁸ The public are encouraged to join the May Queen's procession and participate in her journey. Roaming performers seek to create imaginative encounters for those with whom they interact. The narrative of Beltane, with its complex array of symbols and sensations, encompasses the audience through the openness of the ritual space. As in the Stonehaven Fireball Ceremony, individuals are encouraged to respond physically and emotionally to moments of transition, whether such transitions be personal or shared with those around them. The evening unfolds as a kind of progressive revelation, a creative re-telling saturated by liminality. Change and transformation are ongoing, taking place not only during the festival, but year on year.

1.3 Fire as Presence

Fire is infused with appealing yet threatening associations, so that to be in the presence of fire is to put oneself on the edge of risk. This element of risk can create an atmosphere charged with expectation. Before the ritual commences, fire is physically absent but already called to mind in anticipation of the rite. It is present in the shared social imagination of the crowd, who are looking forward to the kindling of the flame. Their anticipation is shared by those who will wield the fire, who wait for the proper moment to ignite the first flame. The swingers at Stonehaven draw from the same source of ignition at the harbour, near to where the fireballs will eventually be extinguished. The Beltane Fire Festival uses narrative techniques and audience participation to ceremonially cultivate the neid fire from the initial spark until its final blaze in the Beltane bonfire. Fire is brought into being by those who attend, and those who attend are brought together by the fire. The two are mutually dependent. However, in both rituals, only authorised persons are permitted to ignite, handle, and extinguish the flames.⁶⁷⁹ Its presence is mediated through those who have helped to

⁶⁷⁷ Author's observations.

⁶⁷⁸ Matheson and Tinsley, "Carnavalesque," 17.

⁶⁷⁹ Author's observations. See also: "Beltane Fire Festival 2016," Facebook event, 30 April 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/events/1137843686267247>.

prepare and carry out the ritual. They take on a priestly role, conducting fire through the necessary parts of the ritual.

The presence of fire provides a matrix of overlapping metaphors. The image of fire blurs traditional categories and makes space for apparently opposing ideas to co-exist on the symbolic level. The brighter the flames, the darker the shadows. Its physical heat belies its intangibility. A fire dances, grows, and eventually dies, but is never literally alive.⁶⁸⁰ In this way, fire's liminality — its *in-betweenness* — is related to its multivalence. Liminality involves transitioning from one state to another, and a ritual fire can incorporate several stages of that transition at the same time. Like moments of change, fire is transient but may leave a lasting impression. In these rituals, there is always the hope of its return even when the flame has been extinguished. These are annual events which will be re-enacted the next time the seasons cycle round. It is then that the presence of fire will be reinstated to mediate the ritual for another year.

Stonehaven Fireball Ceremony

What draws thousands of people to brave New Year's Eve outdoors in a small harbour in north-east Scotland? The answer is, quite simply, the presence of fire. The popularity of the Stonehaven Fire Ceremony has been attributed to it being an unparalleled Hogmanay tradition.⁶⁸¹ Among the various winter fire festivals in Scotland — which celebrate with bonfires, flaming barrels, burning boats, and blazing torches — Stonehaven hosts the only fireball procession. The fireballs are visually impressive and mysterious in atmosphere and origin. Anticipation mounts through the various entertainments supplied in the build-up to midnight.⁶⁸² The pipe bands and drummers foreshadow the fireballs by tracing the same route as the swingers down the high street and then back towards the harbour.

In order to manage the risks of fire, Stonehaven high street and the top of Calton Hill are set apart from their surroundings. Visitors are advised to arrive early to secure a good vantage point, and people begin to gather for an hour or more of waiting before the event.

⁶⁸⁰ Charteris-Black, *Fire Metaphors*, 7-8.

⁶⁸¹ Stonehaven Fireballs Association, *Programme*, 6; Sim, "What is 'The Fireballs Ceremony'?"

⁶⁸² Sim, "When is the Fireball Ceremony?"

They must pass through a physical threshold — a gate manned by stewards — in order to enter ritual space. Some spectators display signs of impatience and discomfort as the cold night deepens, but they persevere in the expectation that these spectacles of fire will be worth the effort.⁶⁸³ After the various groups of entertainers have finished performing at Stonehaven Fireball Ceremony, there is half an hour or so of inactivity as the swingers prepare and undergo final safety checks.⁶⁸⁴ When it finally arrives, the countdown to midnight also announces the imminence of the fireballs. For most of the crowd, hours of travelling and waiting lead up to this moment. The heightened anticipation sacralises the striking of midnight, lending it a fairytale quality. As in fairytales, midnight brings a transformation: from one time period to the next, and from stasis to ritual.⁶⁸⁵

Fire animates inanimate materials. Flames dance as combustion releases latent energy in the fuels it consumes.⁶⁸⁶ The fire of the ceremony also prompts the movement of the swingers, who must begin swinging their fireball as soon as it is lit.⁶⁸⁷ Movement keeps the flames under control, preventing the fireball from burning too intensely to be handled.⁶⁸⁸ The sound of the fireballs is so low that it creates a physical, bass vibration.⁶⁸⁹ The roar of combustion rises on the swingers' approach and then ebbs as they continue onward.⁶⁹⁰

The continuous movement, paired with the combustion of the particular materials that make up the fireballs, creates a textured effect at the core of the fire. The flames possess a visual depth that constantly draws the eye whenever the fireball is in view.⁶⁹¹ Spectators cannot see the fireballs at all times during the procession, since lines of sight are obstructed

⁶⁸³ Author's observations.

⁶⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁸⁵ Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle, *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory* (Abingdon/New York: Routledge, 2016), 102.

⁶⁸⁶ Rossotti, *Fire*, 8-9.

⁶⁸⁷ Appendix 2.5 shows cinders flying as burning fuel overflows from a freshly-lit fireball.

⁶⁸⁸ Author's observations.

⁶⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁶⁹¹ Ibid.

by the rest of the crowd and the topography of the high street. For spectators closest to the fireball, its heat is powerful but transient. The crowd's anticipation is never fully satisfied until the final swinger passes by. After all, while the procession is ongoing, there is always another whirling fireball to come.

Since the fireballs cannot always be seen from a distance, spectators look to other signs of its approach: the glow reflecting off the front of the buildings; the sounds of the fireballs, and the shouts from those peering out of windows overhead.⁶⁹² For those gathered in view of the slipway to the harbour, an extra stage of excitement awaits in the hurling of fireballs into the North Sea. For the swingers, this marks the end of a journey in which they survived the danger of leaping flames, overcame physical exertion, and re-enacted an age-old tradition. Through carrying the fire, they have completed an almost mythic feat. When the swingers finish swinging, they do so victoriously. In the Stonehaven Fireballs Ceremony, the physical meets the intangible as swingers whirl the fire around themselves. It is a ritual of movement in which time, people, and fire all move inexorably forward. The ritual performs the blending of bodies and fire in which the body emerges cleansed and the fire dies, only to be revived for the same purpose next year.

Beltane Fire Festival

Like the visitors to Stonehaven's Hogmanay celebration, the audience of the Beltane Fire Festival must cross a threshold before the ritual has officially begun. Attendees await the moment when they reach the front of the queue and receive permission to enter the site of the ritual. For the audience gathering on the night of the Beltane Fire Festival, the approach towards sacred space is heightened by the long wait for entry. Gradually, the audience filters through the ticket barriers and security checks, after which they are released onto the top of the hill.⁶⁹³ As they move from queues to open space, the audience mirrors the progress of the May Queen and Green Man from cold stasis to self-directed movement.

Against the festival's backdrop of material and symbolic darkness, fire provides physical and ritual illumination at the Beltane Fire Festival. Without fire, the audience would not be

⁶⁹² Author's observations.

⁶⁹³ Ibid.

able to see performers or navigate between performance areas. As such, the audience depends upon fire to grant them access to the ritual and the world it conveys. The Torchbearers embody this divide between worlds, and ‘are the physical representation of the veil between the real world and the fae world.’⁶⁹⁴ At the same time, the light of their torches ‘allows the audience to see through the veil and witness the festival.’⁶⁹⁵ Fire grants access to ritual space while also demarcating it. The illumination it offers is often patchy and unsteady, revealing the fae world in elusive glimpses.⁶⁹⁶ The flames form a portable barrier which reminds the audience of their role as witnesses who may participate in — but not shape — the ritual.⁶⁹⁷ In this way, the Torchbearers’ fire protects the ritual from being corrupted or impeded.

The flickering light makes passive spectating difficult. The audience engages in a continuous journey in pursuit of flames, whether following the torches of the procession or seeking the fire used in other parts of the ritual scattered about the hill. This may involve physical effort and strain in finding a vantage point amongst the thousands of other attendees.⁶⁹⁸ Those who are not willing to make this effort, or engage in the acts of interpretation necessary to draw meaning from the performers’ actions, may easily become disengaged from the ritual.⁶⁹⁹ Fire at Beltane is not accessed by mere proximity but requires physical participation and imaginative, intellectual, and emotional engagement.

However, members of the public are not permitted to physically interact with fire during the festival. Starting unauthorised fires, or bringing fire performance equipment onto the site for personal use, is strictly prohibited.⁷⁰⁰ This has not always been the case: in the early

⁶⁹⁴ “Group Info.” ‘Fae’ denotes the domain of spirits and magical creatures. The Reds, Whites, Blues, and other creatures portrayed in the Beltane Fire Festival belong to the ‘fae’ world.

⁶⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁹⁶ Author’s observations.

⁶⁹⁷ This division between performers and audience developed over the evolution of the festival. Matheson and Tinsley, “Carnavalesque,” 14-16.

⁶⁹⁸ Author’s observations.

⁶⁹⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰⁰ Ibid.

phases of the festival, fire was available to all.⁷⁰¹ Though a practical measure to increase site safety, this change also delineates ritual spaces the audience must not venture into, lest they interfere with the performance (and risk their own safety).⁷⁰² The presence of fire is mediated solely through the Beltane performers. As with ritual in the Hebrew Bible, fire is restricted to authorised intermediaries.⁷⁰³ Though a practical measure, restricting access to fire at the Beltane Fire Festival helps to maintain the ritual integrity of fire performances, ensuring that fire is handled in accordance with its role as the central symbol of the Beltane narrative.

Fire is in constant motion, whether that be in the roaring flames of the Fire Arch, the wild leaps of the Reds, the restless energy of the Nomadic Flame, or the ceremonial choreography found at Fire Point. The narrative is conveyed by the movement of fire. The ritual cannot begin until fire is present through the lighting of the neid fire, and it cannot end until the journey finishes at the Beltane bonfire. The neid fire is ignited with friction from the movement of a hazel spindle on wood. This produces a tiny ember which is quickly cultivated into a much larger flame.⁷⁰⁴ From this flame the Torchbearers light their torches, ready to transport it throughout their journey as part of the May Queen's procession.⁷⁰⁵

Before the procession leaves the 'Acropolis,' three fire sculptures — each suspended between two columns — are set ablaze.⁷⁰⁶ Within a few moments, the neid fire blooms to a monumental scale. Two of the stylised frames depict figures of the Green Man and May Queen several feet tall and hung high above the crowd. The third frame represents a more abstract image of nature, fire, or the sun.⁷⁰⁷ Unlit, the sculptures are unmoving and barely discernible. However, they are entirely transfigured by the neid fire, much like the 'Sun King'

⁷⁰¹ Matheson and Tinsley, "Carnavalesque," 16.

⁷⁰² *Ibid.*, 17.

⁷⁰³ As demonstrated by Leviticus 10; Numbers 16.

⁷⁰⁴ "The Tradition of the Neid Fire," Beltane Fire Society, last modified 29 October 2013, <https://beltane.org/2013/10/29/the-tradition-of-the-neid-fire>.

⁷⁰⁵ "Group Info."

⁷⁰⁶ See photograph in Appendix 3.2. Footage is available in Appendix 3.5.

⁷⁰⁷ The subject of the third sculpture may vary from year to year.

became animated during the Paralympic Closing Ceremony (see Chapter 4). The movement of the flames magnifies the portraits of the Green Man and the May Queen, which become ethereal in their burning. It is as if the neid fire has given them life: the figures appear to be in motion and are, in that sense, eerily life-like. Through them, the neid fire becomes a visible, animating presence that cannot be ignored.⁷⁰⁸ Fire presides over the festival in the shape of Beltane's deities even as it fuels the creative performances on the hill below.

At the Beltane Fire Festival, fire has sacral significance through its symbolism of life, death, cleansing, and rebirth.⁷⁰⁹ The tone and nature of performances are guided by their physical and narrative relationship with the Beltane fire. Each year the image of fire is revived, reimagined, and reinterpreted through the unique performances which make up that year's festival.⁷¹⁰ Through these performances, fire's multivalence is creatively explored and ritually applied. Such application can be found corporately, in the society's use of fire to capture important moments and concepts in the Beltane story; and personally, in the experience of individuals as they respond to the ritual's imagery. A single instance of fire may be interpreted and reinterpreted multiple times by the same individual, since its meaning is informed by the interpreter's mutable emotional landscape as well as the ritual context.⁷¹¹ The Beltane ritual experience is intentionally fluid.⁷¹² As such, Beltane fire imagery presents innumerable possibilities for interpretation — including the subversion of common associations of the image. Where fire's destruction is juxtaposed with vitality and movement, the imagery challenges the binary opposition of life and death. Groups such as Nomadic Flame make fire an extension of the body, subverting conventional wisdom that suggests fire should always be kept at a distance.⁷¹³ Hence, while fire is the governing image of the

⁷⁰⁸ Author's observations.

⁷⁰⁹ "Purifying force."

⁷¹⁰ "Running Order."

⁷¹¹ For example, the overall nature of a person's engagement with festival imagery is influenced by whether or not they are in a transitional stage of life (Tinsley and Matheson, "Layers of Passage," 149-50).

⁷¹² "Beltane Audience Experience."

⁷¹³ Jensen, *Ancient Fire*, 85; 87.

festival, it is also permeable: it operates in relation to the other symbols and images. It is this quality which gives the image of fire such wide-ranging imaginative and ritual potential.

As rites of passage, the Stonehaven Fireball Ceremony and the Beltane Fire Festival both deal with 'betwixt and between' moments. They mark seasonal change, simultaneously seeing out the old season and seeing in the new. At Stonehaven, participants are given the opportunity for personal transformation in the ritual act of fireball swinging. Some burn relics of the past, or submit to the flames symbols of hope for the future. They may also become more closely aligned with local identity through participating in the local ritual. The presence of fire contributes to the suspension of ordinary structures and behaviour, enhancing liminal experience.

Beltane Fire Festival celebrates the transition from winter to spring/summer, but the use of fire is orientated towards times of personal change. Performers assume a different persona during the festival, allowing them to explore aspects of their identity in relation to the symbols around them. The image of fire helps create an otherworldly atmosphere, and reinforces the narrative idea of being between two worlds: the mundane and the spiritual. Fire helps sacralise the space on Calton Hill, which is separated from the outside world using physical barriers. Conventional behaviour is suspended in favour of creative and sensory exploration, in which fire is a dominating presence.

In these case studies, the multivalence of fire imagery gives participants different ways to conceptualise the themes and experiences of the ritual as they engage in the uncertainty of liminal states. Personal transformation is not inevitable for participants and spectators, but the opportunity for change exists as the ritual unfolds.⁷¹⁴ These explorations of behaviour and identity can have a lasting effect on the individual's life in the post-liminal stage, after the festival. Their explorations of how the fire imagery of the ritual thus relates to their own shifting circumstances helps the community to realise, and consolidate, change. Similar trends and functions of the image of fire are also evident in the fire festival of Up-Helly-Aa in Lerwick, Shetland. However, Up-Helly-Aa provides a counterpoint to the often individualised forms of transition experienced at Stonehaven and Beltane. Up-Helly-Aa is a festival which uses the image and presence of fire to construct a more rigid delineation of community

⁷¹⁴ Matheson, Rimmer, and Tinsley, "Spiritual attitudes," 19.

identity. The imagery of Up-Helly-Aa affirms a sense of communal belonging for the in-group — the guizers — through their ritual separation as wielders of ritual fire. The ritual thus functions as a ‘consolidation of a social order.’⁷¹⁵ Like Stonehaven and Beltane, Up-Helly-Aa relies on imaginative and sensory engagement with fire to build and inhabit ritual space.

Section 2: Lerwick’s Up-Helly-Aa

Shortly after the fiery Hogmanay celebrations of Stonehaven and elsewhere are concluded, and weeks before the Beltane Fire Festival is set to begin, a season of fire grips the Shetland Isles. From the second week of January until mid-March, the local calendar is peppered with torchlit processions, each of which culminates in a ceremonial boat-burning.⁷¹⁶ Local people process in costumes which often function as disguises — hence, members of the procession are known as ‘guizers.’ The guizing squads are led by ‘the Guizer Jarl,’ the honorary leader of Up-Helly-Aa. This title utilises the Norse term for a ruler, ‘jarl’ (pronounced: *yarl*). Only the Guizer Jarl and his squad are dressed in Viking costume, though much of the festival’s aesthetic shares this Viking theme. With chants and songs, the Guizer Jarl leads the guizers to the burning of the Up-Helly-Aa ‘galley,’ a custom-built boat crafted for the event. At the designated burning site, the guizers throw their flaming torches into the galley, which burns until it is completely destroyed. After the fire has died down, the guizers spend the rest of the night entertaining local people with drama skits, dances, and song.⁷¹⁷

Up-Helly-Aa (or *Up Helly A’*) is an expression of Shetland culture and community identity dating back more than 150 years.⁷¹⁸ In 2017, there were eleven separate Up-Helly-Aa celebrations, each hosted by a different Shetland community.⁷¹⁹ The most well-established of these is the celebration of Up-Helly-Aa in Shetland’s capital, Lerwick. This administrative

⁷¹⁵ Hausner, *Spirits*, 14.

⁷¹⁶ “Up-Helly-A’ round up,” *Shetland Life*, January 2017, 13; Brown, *Up-helly-aa*, 178.

⁷¹⁷ A detailed study of the performance of Up-Helly-Aa is available in Brown, *Up-helly-aa*, 1-14.

⁷¹⁸ Brown, *Up-helly-aa*, 126-128; 142. The exact origins of Up-Helly-Aa are disputed among historians. There are a number of variant spellings of Up-Helly-Aa, which may or may not be hyphenated.

⁷¹⁹ These were: Scalloway; Lerwick; Nesting and Girsta; Uyeasound; Northmavine; Bressay; Cullivoe; Norwick; Walls; South Mainland; and Delting.

centre for Shetland is also an active seaport, placing the 'Viking' festival within a setting of modern-day seafaring.⁷²⁰ Lerwick is the only town on Shetland, setting it apart from the 'rural' celebrations of neighbouring regions.⁷²¹ The rural Up-Helly-Aa festivals developed over time, after the celebrations of Lerwick had become well established, and each possesses a unique character.⁷²² While the fundamentals of the torchlit procession and boat-burning ritual are a common thread throughout all Up-Helly-Aa celebrations, aspects of organisation, costuming, and participation vary between communities. In Lerwick, the galley is not sea-bound, but some rural Up-Helly-Aa processions end with burning the galley at sea.⁷²³ Women actively participate in all aspects of the rural Up-Helly-Aa celebrations, while they are excluded from the fire rites of Up-Helly-Aa in Lerwick.⁷²⁴

For the purposes of this chapter, I will focus solely on Lerwick's Up-Helly-Aa. No other Scottish winter fire festival 'can match Lerwick Up-helly-aa [sic] for its scale [...] or its significance to the local people.'⁷²⁵ Lerwick's Up-Helly-Aa is not only an expression of 'Lerwegian' identity; it is a festival which affects the entirety of the island, influencing how Shetland presents itself to the rest of the world.⁷²⁶ The following observations have been drawn from my site visit to Lerwick's Up-Helly-Aa on 31 January 2017.⁷²⁷

⁷²⁰ "Lerwick," Promote Shetland, accessed 14 March 2017, <http://www.shetland.org/plan/areas/lerwick>.

⁷²¹ "Up Helly Aa," Promote Shetland, accessed 14 March 2017, <http://www.shetland.org/things/events/culture-heritage/up-helly-aa>.

⁷²² Brown, *Up-helly-aa*, 178.

⁷²³ "Up-Helly-A' round up," 13.

⁷²⁴ Brown, *Up-helly-aa*, 186.

⁷²⁵ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁷²⁶ James Irvine, *Up-Helly-Aa: A Century of Festival* (Lerwick: Shetland Publishing Co., 1982), 16; Brown, *Up-helly-aa*, 194.

⁷²⁷ Photographs and footage from my site visit are included in Appendices 4 and 5.

2.1 Communication and Participation

In the opinion pages of *The Shetland Times* published on 3 February 2017 — only a few days after that year's Up-Helly-Aa celebrations in Lerwick — one contributor declared: 'There are many things that make our community unique but foremost among them is Up-Helly-A' [sic].⁷²⁸ Lerwick's Up-Helly-Aa takes place each year on the last Tuesday in January.⁷²⁸ The daytime festivities of Up-Helly-Aa celebrate the Guizer Jarl and his squad, as well as their young counterparts from the Junior Up-Helly-Aa festival.⁷²⁹ They tour the town to bring the festivities of Up-Helly-Aa into community venues (including local schools, hospitals, homes for the elderly, and museum) with pageantry, speeches, and song.⁷³⁰

Up-Helly-Aa permeates the culture of Shetland. People from all over the Shetland Isles are involved on the night, converging on a town of only 7,500 residents.⁷³¹ In anticipation of the event, shop window displays are dominated by relics of festivals past.⁷³² These include costumes from former Guizer Jarls and their squads; models of the Up-Helly-Aa galley; old event programmes and photographs of guizers; and Up-Helly-Aa memorabilia, including the Guizer Jarl's raven flag.⁷³³ From a young age, islanders are taught Up-Helly-Aa songs and traditions in school. Their tutelage pays off each year when, on the day of Up-Helly-Aa, the Guizer Jarl's squad visits the local primary schools to lead the pupils in an Up-Helly-Aa sing-a-long.⁷³⁴

After the daytime celebrations of Up-Helly-Aa, the Junior procession gathers in a quiet residential area, ignites their torches, and marches with their 'peerie galley' towards the

⁷²⁸ Promote Shetland, "Up Helly Aa."

⁷²⁹ The participants of Junior Up-Helly-Aa are local school children between 11 and 14 years old. See: Brydon Leslie, *The Peerie Guizers: A Celebration of Junior Up-Helly-Aa* (Lerwick: The Shetland Times, 2016), 63.

⁷³⁰ Brown, *Up-helly-aa*, 4-5.

⁷³¹ Promote Shetland, "Lerwick."

⁷³² Up-Helly-Aa memorabilia is also exhibited in the Shetland Museum and Archives, as shown in Appendix 5.3.

⁷³³ See Appendix 5.5 showing the raven flag on the town flagpole; and Appendix 5.6, photograph of an Up-Helly-Aa themed shop window display.

⁷³⁴ Brown, *Up-helly-aa*, 4-5.

burning site.⁷³⁵ Here, they enact the same boat-burning ritual that the senior guizers will undertake later in the evening, patterned on the same ritual elements.⁷³⁶ Finally, at the signal, the young squads throw their torches into the galley to create a spectacular bonfire.⁷³⁷ The greatest difference between Junior and Senior Up-Helly-Aa is that of scale. In 2017, the Junior procession numbered around 87 guizers organised into 14 squads.⁷³⁸ The total number of guizers for the senior Up-Helly-Aa procession was given at 1,004 (of these, 872 were torchbearers).⁷³⁹

Up-Helly-Aa has been described by ex-Guizer Jarl Douglas C. Smith as ‘the culmination of countless hours of work and companionship.’⁷⁴⁰ For months beforehand, dedicated teams of ‘torch boys’ meet regularly to construct hundreds of torches ready for burning. The torches are constructed of a long wooden beam capped with a hessian bag, which is nailed in place and cemented to the handle to prevent fire spreading onto the wood when the hessian is lit.⁷⁴¹ Another group, the ‘galley boys,’ build the 19 metre-long galley, which takes three months to make by hand.⁷⁴² This creative process pertains to the fire rites of the festival and women are not involved. As in other forms of historical reenactment (discussed in Chapter 3), the skills and craftsmanship of previous generations are kept alive by means of the tradition.⁷⁴³

⁷³⁵ ‘Peerie galley’ carries the sense of ‘wee boat’ (see Leslie, *Peerie Guizers*, ix). See Appendix 4 for a visual overview of the Junior Up-Helly-Aa procession.

⁷³⁶ Author’s observations.

⁷³⁷ Ibid. See also *Up-Helly-Aa 2017 Official Programme* (Lerwick: The Shetland Times, 2017), 49.

⁷³⁸ *Official Programme*, 49.

⁷³⁹ Ibid., back cover.

⁷⁴⁰ Douglas C. Smith, *Noo Dan!* (Lerwick: Shetland Times, 2009), 118.

⁷⁴¹ Irvine, *Up-Helly-Aa*, 59-60. See photograph of unlit torches in Appendix 5.4.

⁷⁴² Davie Gardner, Tom Morton, and Peter Malcolmson, speaking on the Promote Shetland Up-Helly-Aa live broadcast, 31 January 2017. Originally broadcast at <http://uphellyaa.com> and available to view for 24 hours after the event.

⁷⁴³ Leslie, *Peerie Guizers*, 23; Irvine, *Up-Helly-Aa*, 46; 59.

Besides the materials for burning, the event requires the production of hundreds of costumes, as well as logistical collaboration between the Up-Helly-Aa committee, the local council, and the police. As 2017 Guizer Jarl Lyall Gair noted, ‘The beauty of Up-Helly-A’ is that everybody just mucks in.’⁷⁴⁴ Commentators have estimated that roughly two-thirds of Lerwick’s population participated in the 2017 event.⁷⁴⁵

Each Up-Helly-Aa squad has its own particular character, as the squad members express their personalities through choice of name, costume, and theme tune.⁷⁴⁶ Creating a cohesive procession out of hundreds of idiosyncratic groups requires considerable organisation. At the Beltane Fire Festival, fire is used as a common feature between disparate groups; but fire at Up-Helly-Aa unites the squads by giving them a singular purpose. The cumulative effect of hundreds of torches, organised in ranks, creates unity out of many constituent parts. The torchlight procession and burning of the galley are the only occasions in the entirety of Up-Helly-Aa in which the squads join together and act as one.⁷⁴⁷

On the night of Up-Helly-Aa, after the Junior procession has concluded, the route becomes packed with guizing squads. At the signal of a firework, the procession route becomes suddenly illuminated with the red glow of road flares which the guizers use to ignite their paraffin-soaked torches.⁷⁴⁸ With much cheering, the guizers begin their march to the music of the pipe band.⁷⁴⁹ At the front of the procession, the Guizer Jarl is borne in the stern of the Up-Helly-Aa galley, which has been constructed over the preceding months. Though on wheels, the galley appears to glide along the route as if on water. The Guizer Jarl is accompanied by his sizeable Jarl’s squad.⁷⁵⁰ The guizers march through the freezing

⁷⁴⁴ Guizer Jarl’s speech at the Civic Reception, as reported in *The Shetland Times* Up-Helly-Aa Supplement, 3 February 2017.

⁷⁴⁵ Live commentary.

⁷⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁴⁷ Author’s observations.

⁷⁴⁸ See photographs in Appendix 5.9, 5.10 and 5.11.

⁷⁴⁹ As shown in Appendix 5.17.

⁷⁵⁰ In 2017, the Jarl’s squad consisted of 58 members. *Official Programme*, back cover. The photograph in Appendix 5.2 shows a member of the Guizer Jarl’s squad marching with the galley.

January weather, but they and their burning torches persist even in diving rain, gale-force winds, and snow.⁷⁵¹ The procession route takes the guizers and their galley to the burning site: a children's play park in the middle of a residential area. The crowd jostles for position around the edge, cut off from the action by walls and safety barriers but determined to find a good vantage point.

The potential threat of fire helps build community within the uncertainty of liminal space. In the senior procession, hundreds of flaming torches are used and flying cinders are common.⁷⁵² Even when the procession is in full swing, participants and observers alike are expected to keep a watchful eye for sparks landing on those around them. Participants work together to ensure fire remains under control and in the service of the ritual. Everyone has a neighbourly duty to 'look after the chap in front of you.'⁷⁵³ Each guizer trusts that the person behind will do the same.⁷⁵⁴ In order to fulfill their duty to one another, guizers must follow the person in front directly and maintain the proper stride.⁷⁵⁵ The impression of tightly-regulated, orderly marching results from a response to fire's unpredictable nature. Underlying such an impression is the collaboration of hundreds of participants who seem careful and yet comfortable handling their ritual flames.⁷⁵⁶

The sheer number of lit torches enhances the effect of guizers marching as one.⁷⁵⁷ In the darkness, and especially with high winds, the streaming torch flames seem to form a continuous trail of fire.⁷⁵⁸ This image is especially potent as the procession snakes around

⁷⁵¹ Author's observations. See also Irvine, *Up-Helly-Aa*, 125.

⁷⁵² Author's observations; Irvine, *Up-Helly-Aa*, 125.

⁷⁵³ Live commentary.

⁷⁵⁴ This expectation is mirrored among spectators. During my 2017 visit to Up-Helly-Aa, I witnessed a woman using her glove to smother a burning cinder that had landed on the person next to her. The resulting conversation suggested the two individuals did not know each other, but that this kind of vigilance was both expected and fully appreciated.

⁷⁵⁵ Author's observations. The beat of the pipe band no doubt helps regulate the speed of the procession. Music is another important dimension of Up-Helly-Aa (see Irvine, *Up-Helly-Aa*, 103-112).

⁷⁵⁶ Author's observations.

⁷⁵⁷ Brown, *Up-helly-aa*, 6.

⁷⁵⁸ Author's observations. See photograph in Appendix 5.13.

the galley at the burning site. The guizers' circling movement resembles 'a slow-motion Catherine Wheel of fire.'⁷⁵⁹ Now that they circle the galley, their joint purpose — the final boat-burning — is affirmed through a passionate rendition of *The Galley Song*.⁷⁶⁰ The Guizer Jarl, still elevated in the stern of his galley, calls for three cheers: first, for those who built the galley; second, for those who constructed the torches; and finally, for Up-Helly-Aa itself. The Guizer Jarl is also honoured by three cheers. He dismounts the galley and a bugle call signals the commencement of the burning.

Rank by rank, the squads cast their torches into the galley. *The Norseman's Home* is sung as the galley billows out huge flames and transforms into a raging bonfire.⁷⁶¹ Each guizer participates in the final burning. Their individual torch flames come together to transform the galley into a single, massive bonfire. The climax of the ritual is only achieved through the combined effort of the whole procession.⁷⁶²

The fire festival of Up-Helly-Aa is intertwined with the outlook, activities, and self-understanding of the community.⁷⁶³ The recorded history of Up-Helly-Aa only extends as far back as the late 1800s, but newspaper sources of the time pass little comment on what appears to be a long-standing tradition among the local populace.⁷⁶⁴ In the 19th century, Up-Helly-Aa was celebrated with 'tar-barrelling.' Tubs of tar were loaded onto sleds, set alight, and rushed through the streets of Lerwick by young men dressed in various disguises. Tar-barrelling was considered a public nuisance, though guizers were reportedly given festive

⁷⁵⁹ "Up Helly Aa," Shetland Islands Council, accessed 15 March 2017, <https://www.shetland.org/things/events/culture-heritage/up-helly-aa>.

⁷⁶⁰ *Official Programme*, 7. Lyrics for *The Galley Song* are available in Appendix 1.2.

⁷⁶¹ As shown in Appendix 5.14, 5.15, and 5.16. A brief video demonstrates the scale of the conflagration in Appendix 5.19.

⁷⁶² Author's observations.

⁷⁶³ Brown, *Up-helly-aa*, 17.

⁷⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 126-127.

receptions in the homes of friends and family after the tar-barrelling was over.⁷⁶⁵ For one individual, at least, tar barrels were a firm expression of being ‘a real Lerwick boy.’⁷⁶⁶

Tar-barrelling was finally outlawed in 1874, followed a few years later by the first Up-Helly-Aa torchlight procession.⁷⁶⁷ Nordic imagery became characteristic of the celebrations in the late 1880s, and over time Up-Helly-Aa gained those features which define the modern festival: the galley, the Guizer Jarl, and the final boat-burning.⁷⁶⁸ Writing his 1948 volume on the history of Up-Helly-Aa, C. E. Mitchell captured the inextricable nature of Up-Helly-Aa as part of Lerwick community life:

Why is it that no native-born Shetlander has ever written a history of the Tar-barrels and Up-Helly-Aa? I think the answer is that, like getting up in the morning and going to bed at night, Tar-barrels and Up-Helly-Aa were part and parcel of Lerwegian life, and ‘what was there to write about anyway?’: it is not much good telling people what they know already.⁷⁶⁹

The opinion pages of *The Shetland Times* (3 February 2017) extoll ‘the way [Up-Helly-Aa] brings the community together.’ However, in its exclusion of female guizers, Lerwick’s Up-Helly-Aa is less than unifying. Its ethos of inclusion only goes so far, it seems, as the Up-Helly-Aa Committee chooses to maintain the traditional gender roles around which the festival has been organised for over 150 years.⁷⁷⁰ The men of the community embody Shetlandic identity and are Lerwick’s representatives to the world; meanwhile, the work of women at the festival is all but invisible, undertaken ‘behind the scenes’ to facilitate

⁷⁶⁵ C.E. Mitchell, *Up-Helly-Aa, Tar-Barrels and Guizing: Looking Back* (Lerwick: T. & J. Manson, 1948), 75. Brown argues some hosts may have been compelled into providing hospitality to prevent upset guizers smearing their property with tar (Brown, *Up-helly-aa*, 89).

⁷⁶⁶ Letters page of *The Shetland Times*, 29 January, 1876; quoted in Mitchell, *Up-helly-aa*, 38.

⁷⁶⁷ Irvine, *Up-Helly-Aa*, 18; Brown, *Up-helly-aa*, 127-128.

⁷⁶⁸ See Mitchell, *Up-Helly-Aa*, 89-90; Brown, *Up-helly-aa*, 136; Irvine, *Up-Helly-Aa*, 133.

⁷⁶⁹ Mitchell, *Up-Helly-Aa*, v.

⁷⁷⁰ Brown, *Up-helly-aa*, 182.

hospitality at the halls.⁷⁷¹ They may assist in the manufacture of guizing costumes, but not wear them.⁷⁷²

Those who support the status quo argue that the ritual, with its imagery of fire and Vikings, is inherently masculine. Junior Up-Helly-Aa is viewed as a rite of passage into manhood in which '[b]oys are being taught to be men' according to the behaviours, identity performance, and gender-encoded imagery modelled by the senior Up-Helly-Aa celebrations.⁷⁷³ Brown declares that '[t]he core images of the festival are of supreme masculinity,' including fire.⁷⁷⁴ However, he fails to engage with evidence to the contrary when discussing the involvement of women at rural Up-Helly-Aa festivals, focusing instead on social considerations.⁷⁷⁵ Some local people argue that the rural Up-Helly-Aa celebrations demonstrate that female guizers do not jeopardise the ritual's symbolism; on the contrary, prominent figures such as Lesley Simpson (Shetland's first female Guizer Jarl) demonstrate the contribution women can make.⁷⁷⁶

In early 2018, the Junior Up-Helly-Aa committee actively discussed the possibility of including girls in the junior procession.⁷⁷⁷ Such a decision could have ramifications for the senior procession, since the young participants of Junior Up-Helly-Aa are the next generation of senior guizers.⁷⁷⁸ The discussion among Shetlanders on this issue is ongoing. For the time being, it should be kept in mind that where Shetland identity is constructed through the Lerwick Up-Helly-Aa — and especially where it is epitomised in the guizers or Guizer Jarl —

⁷⁷¹ Irvine, *Up-Helly-Aa*, 71-79; Brown, *Up-helly-aa*, 23-24.

⁷⁷² Brown, *Up-helly-aa*, 24.

⁷⁷³ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁷⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁷⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 182-188.

⁷⁷⁶ Simpson, who was Guizer Jarl for South Mainland Up-Helly-Aa in 2015, is among those who argue for full inclusion of female guizers. See Lesley Simpson, "Tracks of my Life," in *Shetland Life*, January 2017, 16-17.

⁷⁷⁷ Chris Cope, "Junior UHA to discuss letting girls take part," *Shetland News* online, last modified 6 February 2018, <http://www.shetnews.co.uk/news/15847-junior-uha-to-discuss-letting-girls-take-part>.

⁷⁷⁸ Further details about the significance of the Junior procession for the history of Up-Helly-Aa is available in Leslie, *Peerie Guizers*, 46-48; 58-62. See also Brown, *Up-helly-aa*, 24-26.

it is constructed through a masculine lens. The ritual and social status of male members of the Shetlandic community is thus consolidated through their participation in Up-Helly-Aa.⁷⁷⁹

The Up-Helly-Aa Committee attributes the continued success of Up-Helly-Aa to the participation and enthusiasm of the young participants of Junior Up-Helly-Aa.⁷⁸⁰ The young guizers create their own costumes, torches, and galley with the help of parents, teachers, and members of the Up-Helly-Aa Committee.⁷⁸¹ Although any children's procession might require collaboration between different elements of the community, the inherent dangers of fire necessitates extra support from adult guizers, who pass on their practical experience of building and handling fire apparatus to the next generation.⁷⁸² Adult stewards to participate in the Junior procession in full costume, validating the event as a true celebration of Up-Helly-Aa.⁷⁸³

⁷⁷⁹ Hausner, *Spirits*, 14.

⁷⁸⁰ "Junior Up Helly Aa," Up-Helly-Aa Committee, accessed 9 April 2017, <http://www.uphellyaa.org/about-up-helly-aa/junior-up-helly-aa>. Further details in Leslie, *Peerie Guizers*, 46-48; 58-62; Brown, *Up-helly-aa*, 24-26.

⁷⁸¹ Leslie, *Peerie Guizers*, 60-63; "Junior Up Helly Aa."

⁷⁸² Leslie, *Peerie Guizers*, 48; 70-71.

⁷⁸³ *Ibid.*, ix; 58; 68-69.

2.2 Purification and Creative Transformation

Transition and liminality

Like the Stonehaven Fireball Ceremony and the Beltane Fire Festival, Up-Helly-Aa is a calendar custom which uses fire to mark seasonal transition.⁷⁸⁴ Up-Helly-Aa draws the month of January to a close, and along with it, the traditional Yuletide season.⁷⁸⁵ However, the traditional Julian calendar has long since been consigned to history, and the end of Yule is not the foremost transition in people's minds. Shetland's Up-Helly-Aa season is only just beginning, and will be active in rural regions until mid-March. It is only at the last Up-Helly-Aa festival, in Delting, that the fire brings about 'winter's last anguished gasp.'⁷⁸⁶ Lerwick's present-day Up-Helly-Aa gives the sense of a season *under way*, rather than a season coming to an end. Up-Helly-Aa also has 'year-round symbolism' which influences the social life and institutions of Shetlanders.⁷⁸⁷ The Guizer Jarl and his squad, who have represented Shetland for the past twelve months, must step aside and allow the new Guizer Jarl to take office. By its annual repetition, Up-Helly-Aa renews the social structure that the previous year's festival established.

The entire day of Up-Helly-Aa carries traits of liminality. Everyday routine is disrupted by the daytime marches and evening procession, and some businesses close early to allow guizers and their supporters to prepare for the evening celebrations.⁷⁸⁸ The day begins with the posting of 'the Bill' which declares the commencement of Up-Helly-Aa. This enormous hand-painted document is suffused with double-entendres inspired by local people and events from the past year, and its jokes are often at the expense of political leaders and well-known community figures.⁷⁸⁹ The Bill (also called 'the Proclamation') is signed 'by order and under the seal of the Guizer Jarl,' and indicates that the ritual hierarchy of Up-Helly-Aa takes

⁷⁸⁴ This is particularly characteristic of New Year fire celebrations, of which Up-Helly-Aa is one. Guizing is common to many of these. See, for instance, the Allendale Tar Bar'l Festival in Northumberland.

⁷⁸⁵ Mitchell, *Up-Helly-Aa*, 2.

⁷⁸⁶ "Up-Helly-A' round up," 13.

⁷⁸⁷ Brown, *Up-helly-aa*, 17.

⁷⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁷⁸⁹ The scale of the Bill is shown in Appendix 5.1.

precedence over the normal social structures.⁷⁹⁰ Thus, traditional authority is subverted as the Guizer Jarl assumes the role of leader of the people.⁷⁹¹ His flag of office is flown on public buildings around the town, including the Town Hall.⁷⁹² This subversion is primarily symbolic, as even the most prestigious of guizers is not above the law. Imaginatively if not always literally, normal functions and social hierarchy of the community are suspended for Up-Helly-Aa.

The torchlight procession and its culmination in the boat-burning ritual represent the most significant expressions of liminality within all of Up-Helly-Aa, both physically and conceptually.⁷⁹³ In Lerwick, the procession route is closed to traffic, as at Stonehaven for the Fireball Ceremony.⁷⁹⁴ Physical space becomes liminal through the suspension of normal structures and functions. Street lights along the route go dark for the senior procession, heightening the anticipation and the brightness of the flames.⁷⁹⁵ On any other day, such quantities of fire would be undesirable in a residential area, but the ritual redefines the meaning of fire in public space. In turn, fire transforms the streets and play park into a ceremonial burning site. It is this liminality which carves out space for celebration and transformation within the community.

⁷⁹⁰ The Guizer Jarl's seal and other details of the Bill are shown in Appendix 5.2.

⁷⁹¹ Brown, *Up-helly-aa*, 48.

⁷⁹² Author's observations.

⁷⁹³ Ibid.

⁷⁹⁴ See photograph in Appendix 5.8.

⁷⁹⁵ Author's observations; Irvine, *Up-Helly-Aa*, 124.

Identity in the 'in-between'

As indicated above, only (male) Shetland residents are permitted to participate as guizers at Up-Helly-Aa.⁷⁹⁶ To be a guizer is to be aligned with other members of the Shetland community, with whom the guizer shares camaraderie and belonging. In *The Galley Song*, which is sung prior to the galley burning, fire is an image of belonging for all who '[raise] aloft the flaming brand' — i.e., the guizers.⁷⁹⁷ Like the solemn torchbearers of Beltane and the joyful fireball swingers of Stonehaven, Up-Helly-Aa's raucous assembly of guizers function as guardians of local custom and value systems. Each one has a 'duty' to show 'Honour, freedom, love and beauty / In the feast, the dance, the song.'⁷⁹⁸ The presence of fire confers prestige upon the guizers, who are called upon to embody the values of Up-Helly-Aa, and thus the community.⁷⁹⁹ They are entrusted with fire which is emblematic of Shetlandic identity, tradition, and collective responsibility. *The Galley Song* continues: 'Truth be our encircling fire.' The guizers themselves provide a visual impression of encircling fire around the galley, which visually reinforces their role in delineating social values.

Guizers are thus representatives of the community who become 'folk heroes' through their torch-bearing.⁸⁰⁰ According to one interpretation of Up-Helly-Aa: 'These heroes speak for their communities, and personify the values and the ethics they decide to stand for, not just for one night, but for a whole year.'⁸⁰¹ Up-Helly-Aa guizers undergo a transformation of identity in much the same way as Beltane Fire Festival performers adopt a persona. For some guizers, this is a chance to disrupt normal expectations of clothing and behaviour. Guizing allows them to play with (and contravene) the limitations of convention — whether of profession, social status, fashion, or gender.⁸⁰² There is irony in that fact that it is

⁷⁹⁶ Ordinarily, one must either be born on Shetland or be resident for at least five years in order to participate in Lerwick Up-Helly-Aa (Brown, *Up-helly-aa*, 19).

⁷⁹⁷ See further lyrics in Appendix 1.2.

⁷⁹⁸ "The Galley Song."

⁷⁹⁹ Alexa Fitzgibbon, "A Community Celebration," in *Shetland Life*, January 2017, 12.

⁸⁰⁰ Fitzgibbon, "Celebration," 12.

⁸⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁸⁰² Brown, *Up-helly-aa*, 183-184.

permissible for male guizers to play with feminine gender performances, yet women are altogether excluded from participating based on the ritual's 'masculine' imagery. The transgression of gender roles is permitted of the men but not of the women.

The procession and boat-burning form a rite of passage which, overwhelmingly, affirms community affiliation. At the Beltane Fire Festival, the identities of the performers are potentially disrupted through costuming and performance art. Each set of performers is distanced from other groups, narratively and, often, physically. At Up-Helly-Aa, each squad maintains a communal identity as friends and co-workers; and all the squads march together. They all share one overarching identity: that of *Up-Helly-Aa guizer*. Their participation in the procession ratifies this status. The torches and burning of the galley differentiate this occasion of guizing from all others. Up-Helly-Aa 'has a feeling of belonging and identity... expressing yourself as "we are the people."' ⁸⁰³ Brown observes that the sense of belonging generated by participation in an Up-Helly-Aa squad makes it an 'unmissable' opportunity for male members of the community. ⁸⁰⁴

The Guizer Jarl undergoes a unique transformation of status and identity during the festival. The road to becoming a Guizer Jarl begins with several years' service on the Up-Helly-Aa committee. Once elected to the position of Guizer Jarl, the prospective master of ceremonies must usually wait 15 years for his turn to take office. ⁸⁰⁵ When his time comes, the Guizer Jarl chooses his squad from friends and family to surround him on the day. This is one of the primary functions of the ritual: for a new Guizer Jarl to take up office by becoming leader of the procession.

The Guizer Jarl and his squad become 'the embodiment of Up-helly-aa [*sic*].' ⁸⁰⁶ More than any other guizer, the Guizer Jarl becomes emblematic of all that Up-Helly-Aa represents. If the guizers 'are the people,' then he is their 'figurehead leader.' ⁸⁰⁷ He has

⁸⁰³ Live commentary.

⁸⁰⁴ Brown, *Up-helly-aa*, 23.

⁸⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁸⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁸⁰⁷ Leslie Brydon, *Borgar Jarl: J. J. Haldane Burgess and Up Helly Aa* (Lerwick: Shetland Amenity Trust, 2012), 12.

become a symbolic leader of the people; in the procession, he literally takes the lead as hundreds of guizers follow. Lerwick's Guizer Jarl will represent Shetland at home and abroad over the coming year.⁸⁰⁸ Likewise, the Guizer Jarl's squad are known as community representatives beyond Up-Helly-Aa, attending overseas events such as the New York Tartan Parade.⁸⁰⁹ At the end of the calendar year, they will once again bear torches at Edinburgh's annual Hogmanay procession, and the experience of the Guizer Jarl and his squad comes full-circle.⁸¹⁰

For the Guizer Jarl, the fire ritual requires a ritual identity. Each Guizer Jarl constructs his own guizing persona which is patterned on a figure from Norse history or Viking legend.⁸¹¹ Hence, he forges a connection with a former era of sea-faring and warfare.⁸¹² During Up-Helly-Aa, it is customary for people to refer to the Guizer Jarl using only his Viking name. He does not lose his private persona entirely, but the identities of personal and public selves are often blurred in his public speeches and interactions during Up-Helly-Aa day. In contrast, participation in the torchlight procession enables the Guizer Jarl to inhabit his Viking identity unequivocally.

Finally seated in his galley, the Guizer Jarl undergoes a transformation from long-standing committee member to Up-Helly-Aa veteran. The ritual actions of torch-bearing and participation in the procession allow him to take up his place of honour. He is fully immersed in the battle-march, his squad surrounding him as a guard of honour. Once he arrives at the burning site — still in the stern of the galley — the entire cohort of guizers encircle him. For the Guizer Jarl, it is an 'unforgettable' moment which goes beyond words: 'it's felt but ye cannae tell it.'⁸¹³ He has waited over a decade for this moment, maybe more.

⁸⁰⁸ Brown, *Up-helly-aa*, 179; *The Shetland Times*, 3 February 2017.

⁸⁰⁹ As reported by *Scottish Field*, 2 March 2018, <https://www.scottishfield.co.uk/news/excitement-continues-to-grow-for-new-yorks-2018-tartan-day-parade>.

⁸¹⁰ VisitScotland, "Hogmanay."

⁸¹¹ The festival programme includes a feature about the Guizer Jarl's chosen namesake (usually an accomplished warrior). The Junior Guizer Jarl also chooses a Viking identity. (See *Official Programme*, 13-15; 47-49.)

⁸¹² Irvine, *Up-Helly-Aa*, 37.

⁸¹³ Live commentary.

Still, there is one more ritual act which must take place to complete the rite of passage. The Guizer Jarl must abandon his galley and lead the guizers in the final burning. Only once this is accomplished will he complete his ritual inauguration.

Renewal through destruction

The burning of the galley is more than destruction. It is the finale of the procession, much anticipated and carefully choreographed. The loss of the galley inspires an emotional response: there is ‘something truly magnificent about that sacrifice.’⁸¹⁴ Like Best’s *Temple*, the galley is an ornate structure which has taken considerable energy and resources for local people to create.⁸¹⁵ Why would the terminus of the ritual be an act of destruction? The answer for Up-Helly-Aa is double-pronged, since it requires considering the Norse imagery at play and the wider context of Up-Helly-Aa as an annual rite of passage.

Local historical sources attribute many of the Nordic features of Up-Helly-Aa to J. J. Haldane Burgess.⁸¹⁶ Burgess was born and raised in Shetland, and has had a lasting legacy as a poet and writer.⁸¹⁷ He had a passionate interest in Norse history and legend, which he expressed through his writings and his involvement in Up-Helly-Aa. Burgess was also a staunch socialist who strongly believed in social reform.⁸¹⁸ The Nordic influences he introduced to Up-Helly-Aa were not only a reminder of what he perceived as Shetland’s Viking past, but spoke of his hope for a revival of the virtues he saw in Viking myth and legend.⁸¹⁹ These concerns are evident in his contribution of *The Up-Helly-Aa Song*, which frames the guizers as inheritors of the Viking legacy.⁸²⁰

⁸¹⁴ Live commentary.

⁸¹⁵ Brown, *Up-helly-aa*, 21; Audley, “Arts project.”

⁸¹⁶ Brown, *Up-helly-aa*, 142.

⁸¹⁷ Leslie, *Borgar Jarl*, 11.

⁸¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 38-39.

⁸¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁸²⁰ “The Up-Helly-Aa Song.” Lyrics reproduced in Appendix 1.2.

In Burgess' vision, fire is emblematic of those 'upon the Viking Path.'⁸²¹ The Viking warrior who dies in battle for his clan is a symbol of heroism in the songs of Up-Helly-Aa, which contrast a warrior's heroic death at sea with the cowardice of one who dies peacefully on land.⁸²² The lyrics of these ritual songs can be taken as liturgical elements of the ritual which shed light on the significance of certain ritual elements. *The Up-Helly-Aa Song*, written by Burgess, associates fire with a noble warrior spirit in the fight for freedom:

From grand old Viking centuries Up-Helly-A' has come / Then light the
torch and form the march, and sound the rolling drum / And wake the
mighty memories of heroes that are dumb / [...] / When the fight for
Freedom rages / Be bold and strong as they!⁸²³

The burning of the galley typifies the 'mysticism and the mythology' which infuse Up-Helly-Aa.⁸²⁴ The procession is said to carry the galley to its 'last rites.'⁸²⁵ The torchlight procession is thus framed as a memorial ritual, reminding the participants of past heroes and calling them to follow in the footsteps of their exemplars. The guizers parade with their galley, which 'is the People's Right, the dragon of the free' as they march in the spirit of their noble ancestors. Boat-burning recalls Norse legends of jarls who were given majestic funeral rites in their longboats.⁸²⁶ The final song of the burning, *The Norseman's Home*, calls the guizers to honour their Norse ancestors who have inspired their 'Viking' boat-burning ritual. As a result, the image of the Viking warrior's death and immolation persists as a common reading of the boat-burning.⁸²⁷

More than a re-enactment of Viking legend, however, the galley points beyond itself. Its journey mirrors that of the Guizer Jarl, whose heraldry it bears. Like him, it has been

⁸²¹ "The Up-Helly-Aa Song."

⁸²² "The Norseman's Home." Lyrics reproduced in Appendix 1.2.

⁸²³ "The Up-Helly-Aa Song."

⁸²⁴ Irvine, *Up-Helly-Aa*, 48.

⁸²⁵ Irvine, *Up-Helly-Aa*, 126; also Leslie, *Peerie Guizers*, 12.

⁸²⁶ Leslie, *Borgar Jarl*, 32.

⁸²⁷ For instance, the live commentary frequently used funerary language was often used to describe the galley burning. See also *The Shetland Times* coverage in the issue from 3 February 2017.

prepared for this purpose; neither of them will leave Up-Helly-Aa unchanged. They are borne through the procession together. *The Galley Song*, which is sung immediately prior to the burning, characterises the blazing ship as ‘the Sea King’s fun’ral pyre.’ When the galley goes up in towering flames, it seems to burn in the Guizer Jarl’s stead. Emphatically, the galley-burning is not treated as a war-like show of victory over a conquered land or slain opponent. The guizers’ rendition of *The Galley Song* is an honouring gesture, sung ‘for the galley before its death.’⁸²⁸ The guizers surround the galley in a posture of farewell — even if guizers and spectators alike give cheers of appreciation when the mast and dragon-headed prow are finally engulfed in flame.⁸²⁹

Satisfaction is gained from the burning because it means the annual rite of Up-Helly-Aa has been fulfilled. When the fire dies down, the acute liminality of the evening eases into a night of revelry. Up-Helly-Aa will not be over until morning, but the fire ritual has done its part.⁸³⁰ As with Stonehaven and Beltane, the final burning of the galley is suggestive of burning away the old to make way for the new. For some, this makes it ‘[a] living metaphor which embodies the end of a cycle and the start of a new one.’⁸³¹ Burning may lead to the destruction of the current vessel, but destruction is not the final word. As a result, the annual repetition of Up-Helly-Aa forms a never-ending ritual pattern: there will always be another galley to burn.⁸³²

With this cycle of renewal comes a sense of purification as ‘...the fire cleanses and the ashes hopefully restore.’⁸³³ Such a tightly-knit community benefits from a ritual which releases tension and allows each member to ‘let off steam.’⁸³⁴ In this understanding, the burning of the galley provides a mechanism by which the community destroys a symbol of the previous year, and all that is associated with it. This does not appear to be a primarily

⁸²⁸ Live commentary.

⁸²⁹ Author’s observations.

⁸³⁰ Brown, *Up-helly-aa*, 9; Irvine, *Up-Helly-Aa*, 127.

⁸³¹ Fitzgibbon, “Celebration,” 12.

⁸³² Live commentary.

⁸³³ Fitzgibbon, “Celebration,” 12.

⁸³⁴ *Ibid.*, 12.

individual act, as at Stonehaven when individuals endow their fireballs with personal meaning. Instead, every guizer at Up-Helly-Aa gathers around one blazing fire they have all helped to create. Each guizer who submits a torch to the galley actively participates in generating the symbol of social renewal.⁸³⁵

The contemporary form of Up-Helly-Aa functions less as a *seasonal* rite of passage and more as a *personal* or *communal* one. It is an experience a guizer may choose to participate in once, or many times over the years. For some, membership of a squad contributes to their overall sense of personal identity. For others, guizing is a one-off bit of fun.⁸³⁶ In the case of the Guizer Jarl, of course, the rite of passage experienced through the fire rituals leaves a lasting mark on the nature of his identity and his personal sense of self.⁸³⁷ Once he has completed his year in office, the Guizer Jarl must adapt to a new, post-liminal life as an ex-Jarl. He joins the Association of ex-Jarls, who share an ‘ongoing commitment’ to Up-Helly-Aa and the community.⁸³⁸ The first responsibility of an ex-Jarl is to undertake the role of Chief Marshal at the next Up-Helly-Aa festival, ensuring a smooth transition as someone new takes up the mantle of Guizer Jarl.⁸³⁹

Up-Helly-Aa inaugurates a year-long period of liminality for the Guizer Jarl and his squad, where normal life and identity are suspended to facilitate their service of the community. At the next Up-Helly-Aa, ‘[t]he torch and its responsibility are [...] passed onto someone else to take on the duty for a new cycle, with both its blessings and burdens.’⁸⁴⁰ The burning of the torches and the galley provide the ritual with the means to begin again.

⁸³⁵ Author’s observations.

⁸³⁶ Informal, unrecorded conversation with archivist from the Shetland Museum and Archives, 2 February 2017.

⁸³⁷ In the light-hearted comic strip collection *Jeemsie da Jarl*, Michael Moncrieff envisions his protagonist perennially dressed in his Guizer Jarl’s costume even for the most mundane of daily tasks. Michael Moncrieff, *Jeemsie da Jarl: A Grand Old Viking Century* (Lerwick: Shetland Times, 2015).

⁸³⁸ Live commentary.

⁸³⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁴⁰ Fitzgibbon, “Celebration,” 12.

2.3 Fire as Presence

Sensory presence

For the majority of its history, the experience of Up-Helly-Aa has only been available to island residents and those who were willing to make the trip across the North Sea from abroad. Now, extensive media coverage allows thousands of viewers to witness the evening event. On 3 February 2017, *The Shetland Times* reported ‘193,000 views of live video coverage’ of that year’s Lerwick Up-Helly-Aa on Facebook, with an additional 16,231 views on the main uphellyaa.com site... with the live footage also shared by news organisations worldwide.’ Features of the festival are explained through live commentary, exchanging experiential knowledge for an understanding of the event from a distance. Such commentary is not available to the spectators who line the procession route; they rely on a blend of local knowledge and an abundance of sensory information to construe meaning in the event.⁸⁴¹ Virtual spectators do not have access to sensory information beyond what they can see on the screen, and so further explanation is needed to help them interpret various aspects of the festival. Shetlanders who happen to be watching the live coverage from abroad use social media to express a longing for home and, specifically, for the sensory experience of fire at Up-Helly-Aa.⁸⁴² Despite the ability to view the festival online from the comfort of one’s own home, fascination with the physical presence of fire continues to draw people to Shetland to witness the festival in person.

At light-up, the torches ‘spring into blazing life’ and utterly transform the darkness.⁸⁴³ From the moment the torches are lit, an otherwise unremarkable road is filled with overwhelming sensory information from the hundreds of torch-bearing guizers. The spectators who line the procession route are close enough to inhale the paraffin-infused air and become immersed in the heat of the torches.⁸⁴⁴ Still, the honour of carrying the flames is reserved for Shetlanders. Up-Helly-Aa and the Stonehaven Fireball Ceremony share a separation between spectators and participants, nominally for safety reasons; but the

⁸⁴¹ Author’s observations.

⁸⁴² Live commentary.

⁸⁴³ Irvine, *Up-Helly-Aa*, 61; author’s observations.

⁸⁴⁴ Author’s observations.

separation of spectators from the fire also protects the integrity of ritual space. Since the Junior Up-Helly-Aa procession is a much smaller affair, spectators are able to drift in and out of the space at will. As in the Beltane Fire Festival, and the very end of the Stonehaven Fireball Ceremony, spectators can join the ritual movement of the junior procession. However, the burning site is strictly out of bounds to spectators during both junior and senior processions.⁸⁴⁵

The presence of almost one thousand torches creates an intense physical experience for those within and around the main procession.⁸⁴⁶ With the streetlights switched off, the blazing torches are the main source of light. Even when the guizers stand still, the flames are in constant movement. The smell of burning paraffin from the torches is among the many sensations of Up-Helly-Aa ‘which are difficult to capture in words.’⁸⁴⁷ For the guizers in their ranks, the heat and scent of combustion are all-encompassing.⁸⁴⁸ As they move off to follow the Guizer Jarl, the motion of the procession brings waves of heat to displace the winter chill.⁸⁴⁹ Fire stands in opposition to the wind and rain — certainly the event is in defiance of the weather.⁸⁵⁰ In the 2017 Up-Helly-Aa procession, the conditions were so extreme that cinders rushed over the heads of guizers in flurries, appearing to one spectator like ‘fire rain.’⁸⁵¹

At the burning site, the presence of fire is intensified as the galley is transformed into an enormous bonfire. Its heat can be felt even around the edge of the park, where the spectators gather at a safe distance to watch the final stage of the fire ritual. Once again, the sensory

⁸⁴⁵ *Official Programme*, 7; “Up-Helly-Aa 2017: VisitScotland’s Guide” pamphlet, no pagination.

⁸⁴⁶ Brown, *Up-helly-aa*, 5-6.

⁸⁴⁷ Leslie, *Peerie Guizers*, 4.

⁸⁴⁸ Live commentary.

⁸⁴⁹ Author’s observations.

⁸⁵⁰ Each year, the programme declares in block capitals: ‘THERE WILL BE NO POSTPONEMENT FOR WEATHER’ (*Official Programme*, 7). The effects of gale-force winds on the torch flames can be seen in Appendix 5.18.

⁸⁵¹ Live commentary.

experience is most intense for the guizers, who stand only a few feet away from the blaze.⁸⁵² The constant movement of light, shadow, and flame endows the galley with a life-like appearance even in its death rites, much like the fire sculptures of the Beltane Fire Festival.⁸⁵³ Nevertheless, the ship is a passive recipient of the flame. Despite being endowed with the symbolism of Up-Helly-Aa, the galley is not capable of fulfilling the requirements of the ritual on its own. It must undergo the changes enacted upon it by the dynamic presence of fire. The galley may be the ritual's emblem, but fire is the active component which makes the galley's transformation — and thus the community's renewal — possible.⁸⁵⁴

Symbolic presence

Few contemporary sources are willing to offer a firm interpretation of the imagery of Up-Helly-Aa, or the symbolic significance of the presence of fire. Those that attempt to do so are often more content to emphasise the Viking theme in connection with Shetland's Nordic heritage, rather than to engage with other aspects of reception.⁸⁵⁵ Some local people deny that the fire 'means' anything at all; rather, it simply provides an exuberant means of celebration.⁸⁵⁶ Attendees participate imaginatively nevertheless. It is difficult to describe the grandeur of the event without using figurative language. Funerary metaphor is a common means by which to engage with the final burning of the galley, even if other aspects of the Norse theme are downplayed.

Some late 19th century sources expressed concerns about 'saturnalia' and the unchristian nature of the festivities.⁸⁵⁷ Modern audiences of the festival remark on its 'pagan' qualities; Robert Blackson, an American-born art curator, comments that the fire festival came about

⁸⁵² Live commentary.

⁸⁵³ As illustrated in Appendix 5.16.

⁸⁵⁴ The coat of arms for the Shetland Islands features a galley as its central symbol (see Appendix 5.7).

⁸⁵⁵ Robert Blackson, "Once More... with Feeling: Reenactment in Contemporary Art and Culture," *Art Journal* 66, no. 1 (Spring 2007): 34-35, accessed 7 March 2017, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20068513>. See also Mitchell, *Up-Helly-Aa*, 3; 116; 225.

⁸⁵⁶ Author's observations.

⁸⁵⁷ *The Shetland Times*, 18 January 1875, quoted in Mitchell, *Up-Helly-Aa*, 37.

‘with few Christian influences.’⁸⁵⁸ This is to overlook the significant contribution of J. J. Haldane Burgess and his contemporaries: Burgess understood Norse mythology to prefigure Christian themes, especially in the sun god Baldur, whom he took as a type of Christ.⁸⁵⁹ This typological understanding informed his use of Norse imagery in Up-Helly-Aa.⁸⁶⁰

The presence of fire should not, in itself, be taken as indicative of any belief system. Fire has always been an inextricable component of Up-Helly-Aa, without which the festival would lose its distinctiveness.⁸⁶¹ The boat-burning climax of Up-Helly-Aa gives this Yuletide festival ‘a character of its own.’⁸⁶² Throughout the history of Up-Helly-Aa, fire forms a continuous thread which connects all past and present celebrations of the event. Before the torches, the procession, the galley, and the Guizer Jarl existed the fire of burning tar-barrels. That, too, was Up-Helly-Aa.⁸⁶³ Fire is understood as a defining component of Shetland’s unique festival, which is ‘a day of fire, feasting, and frolic.’⁸⁶⁴

According to local historian James W. Irvine, ‘Always the festival was seen as a symbol of hope’ in the dark days of winter.⁸⁶⁵ Through the warmth, illumination, and energy of the fire, New Year fire rituals anticipate the return of the heat and light of the sun.⁸⁶⁶ At Up-Helly-Aa, however, fire has significance beyond solar symbolism. It is through the presence of fire that the community accomplishes much of the conceptual work for renewal. Fire consumes the torches and the galley, spurring on the creation of new torches and a new galley for the following year.⁸⁶⁷ Fire’s destruction is cause for celebration because the burning of the galley

⁸⁵⁸ Author’s observations; Blackson, “Once More,” 34.

⁸⁵⁹ Leslie, *Borgar Jarl*, 67-68.

⁸⁶⁰ Leslie, *Borgar Jarl*, 70. Also reflected in the “Up-Helly-Aa Song,” with the line: ‘Before the Light [of Christ] the heathen Night went slowly rolling by...’

⁸⁶¹ Irvine, *Up-Helly-Aa*, 13.

⁸⁶² Ibid.

⁸⁶³ Mitchell, *Up-Helly-Aa*, 4; 15-18.

⁸⁶⁴ Irvine, *Up-Helly-Aa*, 12.

⁸⁶⁵ Ibid., 16.

⁸⁶⁶ Hole, “Winter Bonfires,” 223-224.

⁸⁶⁷ Irvine, *Up-Helly-Aa*, 127.

completes the ritual. It also creates the need for another festival, with another galley and another Guizer Jarl, so that the potential for renewal always lies ahead.

As a repeated ritual, the annual torchlight procession and boat-burning helps maintain ‘a continuity of community.’⁸⁶⁸ This has been evidenced in the role of Up-Helly-Aa for identity construction and community participation. As the most consistent and distinctive of all Up-Helly-Aa’s features, the presence of fire forms an unbroken link between past and future generations. In the burning of the galley, the rites of Up-Helly-Aa and the established structures of the community have been consolidated, cleansed, and renewed. Durkheim might recognise the galley as the ‘totem’ or ‘icon’ of the ritual which is emblematic of the community.⁸⁶⁹ If, as Brown suggests, the Guizer Jarl is not only the people’s representative but ‘the personification of Shetland,’ then the burning of the galley in his stead enacts the renewal of Shetlandic society as a whole.⁸⁷⁰ This capacity of fire to re-make and renew is echoed in other seasonal fire rituals, including the cyclical nature fire in the Beltane Fire Festival and the annual burning of the Stonehaven fireballs.

Chapter Conclusion

At Up-Helly-Aa, Beltane Fire Festival, and the Stonehaven Fireball Ceremony, ritual encounters with fire allow participants to become immersed in mythic narratives of renewal. The openness of the image of fire stands out as a common feature in all three fire rituals analysed in this chapter. Not only is fire multivalent, having the capacity to symbolise multiple (and sometimes conflicting) ideas; it invites personal acts of interpretation and response. At the Stonehaven Fireball Ceremony, both female and male fireball swingers imbue the image of fire with personal significance for the new year. At the Beltane Fire Festival, participants are given opportunity to reflect on their own identity and find their place in a narrative governed by the image of fire. In Lerwick, the fire of Up-Helly-Aa is a means of self-expression and a symbol of belonging for the guizers. In each case, fire is used to construct physical and conceptual liminal space, through which personal and communal

⁸⁶⁸ Hausner, *Spirits*, 13.

⁸⁶⁹ Durkheim, *Elementary Forms*, 102; 119. See also Hausner, *Spirits*, 19f.

⁸⁷⁰ Brown, *Up-helly-aa*, 194.

transition is made possible. The exact nature of individual and community engagement with these fire rituals may change year on year, or even moment by moment. For this to be possible, the image of fire must not be too closely defined, since the openness of the imagery is what makes it ritually versatile.

Openness and ambiguity do not prevent communities from forming a common understanding of the imagery. Images are encountered and interpreted within broader contextual frameworks. Particular communities share historical, political, and cultural frames of reference. Community context accounted for the multivalence and multiplicity of fire imagery during *Temple* and the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic ceremonies in Chapter 4. The same principle can be applied here. Ritual actions, liturgical elements, and physical setting indicate how the image might be understood in keeping with the purpose and character of the ritual. The sensory impact of the imagery narrows it down further: a single large conflagration will evoke different sensations compared with multiple gentle flames. Potential meanings are encoded through these layers of context. Yet meaning is not restrained to what may be intended by the organisers, but can be received in a variety of ambiguous, overlapping, and unarticulated ways.

The Stonehaven Fireball Ceremony, Beltane Fire Festival, and Up-Helly-Aa each use the image and presence of fire to convey the themes and ideas of the ritual. The categories of *communication and participation*, *purification and creative transformation*, and *fire as presence* have offered a structure within which to organise and compare these multifaceted (and multiplicitous) ritual encounters with fire. Within those categories, we have observed how each community has encoded the image of fire to express the ideas and narratives of the ritual. Fire imagery is often applied to metaphysical and existential concerns. This is unsurprising given the existential nature of liminal rites; however, it is significant that fire is the image of choice for the exploration of such concepts.

To mark seasonal transition, Beltane Fire Festival locates fire within a metanarrative of cosmological conflict in which all the elements must come into balance to restore order. The theme of cosmological conflict is also at play in the Stonehaven Fireball Ceremony and Up-Helly-Aa, albeit less explicitly than at Beltane. Their rituals are staged in the depths of winter and are a testament to the community's survival even in their darkest days and coldest nights. The image and presence of fire brings light, energy, and life back to the community.

Fire is used to express hope in adverse conditions and affirm that life will continue through cycles of renewal.

All three rituals each use fire to perform rites of regeneration. Individual and communal renewal are achieved through ritual acts of cleansing. Fire cleanses the community by burning away the past in the form of tokens or community emblems (at Stonehaven and Up-Helly-Aa); and by bringing disparate elements of the ritual together. At Up-Helly-Aa, the guizers join in one cause and unite the flames of their torches in the galley. The various groups at Beltane gather around the bonfire. The burning up of the fireballs and galley provides the kind of catharsis only complete destruction brings. For fire to renew, it must bring both destruction and creation (as exemplified by *Temple* and Up-Helly-Aa). The image of fire is unifying, allowing multiplicitous expressions of self to be drawn together through the ritual's principal symbol of the flame.

In this second movement of the thesis, I have observed how the multivalence of the image of fire has been used to communicate meaning in community and ritual contexts. My case studies of the Stonehaven Fireball Ceremony, Beltane Fire Festival, and Up-Helly-Aa have drawn out the relevance of the image of fire for questions of transformation, belonging, and identity. Alongside the biblical imagery surveyed in Chapter 2 in my movement of orientation, my observations of community and ritual encounters with fire suggest that the image of fire is well suited for exploring theological ideas in a faith context. Moreover, I have shown that fire is not merely an entertaining diversion which happens to be a vehicle for symbolism. The presence of fire facilitates the liminal and transformative process of rites of passage through the affective, embodied experience of being in proximity to flames. The following chapter will explore how the presence and image of fire contributes to ritual experience in existing Christian fire practices, taking into account the layers of context which shape theological encounters with the image of fire.

Third movement: Application

Chapters 6 & 7:

Theological encounters with fire

Thesis Conclusion

Chapter 6: Theological encounters with fire

From everyday encounters to ritualised liminal experiences, the image of fire has a powerful yet complex place in the contemporary British imagination. Fire can bring about immeasurable destruction and grief, and yet its inherent multivalence provides scope for it to become an image of celebration and community bonding. As we have become orientated to the image of fire in biblical imagery and contemporary life, we have seen that the multivalence of fire imagery is rooted in the multifaceted experience of fire itself. We have observed the interplay between personal, communal, and ritual layers of context which underlie the presentation and reception of fire imagery in community fire rituals. The final movement of the thesis will apply these findings to Christian practice, arguing that the image of fire provides ways of deepening sensory and theological engagement within varied expressions of the Christian faith.

The image of fire is a popular metaphor for certain aspects of the Christian faith experience, especially as a descriptor for divine presence, spiritual renewal, and religious ardour.⁸⁷¹ Bishop Michael Curry's royal wedding sermon drew on an established theological metaphor when he used fire as an image for divine and human love.⁸⁷² Although fire imagery is used in contemporary Christian settings — as in Bible readings, homilies, liturgies, and songs — fire itself is often physically absent. Adrian Hastings posits that '[f]ire may be too unpredictable to be a safe symbol for internal use within a highly controlled ecclesiastical and sacramental system.'⁸⁷³ An open fire is physically unpredictable in terms of size, intensity, and duration. The potential instability of fire is part of its danger. Candles offer a more sustained image of light and illumination. Since the candle's primary function is to produce light, its symbolism is largely uncomplicated by the apparently conflicting

⁸⁷¹ Rossotti, *Fire*, 258; Hastings, "Fire," 242.

⁸⁷² Specifically, Bishop Curry quoted the work of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (see Chapter 1). For a transcript of the sermon, see: Michael Curry, "Bishop Michael Curry's rousing royal wedding sermon – the full text," *The Guardian*, 19 May 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2018/may/19/bishop-michael-currys-rousing-royal-wedding-sermon-the-full-text>.

⁸⁷³ Hastings, "Fire," 242.

theological categories which are more prominent in the flames of an open fire.⁸⁷⁴ Fire's conceptual unpredictability can be attributed to its multivalent character.

In my movement of observation, I concluded that one way to negotiate the ambiguity of the image of fire is to frame the chosen fire imagery within a community narrative. Existing Christian fire practices are shaped by some of the same social forces which influence other contemporary community fire practices. Traditional and alternative Christian fire practices use the image of fire to facilitate communication and participation, purification and creative transformation, and generate a sense of presence. As such, the image of fire is not only relevant to Christian practice because of its significance in the biblical texts. It is an image which may be used to explore ritual liminality, aspects of identity, personal transformation, and existential or spiritual meaning. Many aspects of the image have proven compatible with theological concerns, being applied to questions of human nature, life, death, virtue, and cycles of renewal.

In view of its ritual and theological potential, how might the image of fire be explored more fully within a contemporary Christian setting? I will argue that engaging with the multivalence of fire imagery through tangible experiences can offer new ways to communicate theological meanings and participate in Christian faith and identity. For this chapter, I have therefore selected a number of Christian fire practices which engage with theological ideas through physical interactions with fire and fire imagery. The fire practices within this chapter provide examples of how different Christian communities have placed fire within a theological framework and thus found theological meaning within its imagery. Their multi-sensory approaches to fire imagery have brought spiritual experience into the realm of bodily participation.

I begin by examining the Easter Vigil and its use of the new fire as an image of hope, salvation, and divine presence. I will go on to consider the relationship between fire, liminality, and transition in alternative Christian communities as expressed through token-burning and seasonal rituals. Finally, I will consider how engaging imaginatively with the sensory dimensions of fire can contribute to Christian practice even when fire is not physically present. As we shall see, the tangible presence of fire is highly applicable to

⁸⁷⁴ This is not to suggest the candle flame lacks multivalence or physical risk; only that candles provide an encounter with fire on a smaller, and more containable, scale. See Chapter 1.

Christian expressions of worship and community — and yet the complexity of its imagery is often not fully articulated. This chapter will argue that existing practices do not go far enough to access the depth and tensions of the image for a contemporary world.

Section 1: The multivalence of fire imagery in the Easter Vigil

In Christian thought and practice, the multivalence of fire imagery receives limited engagement beyond what is presented through the liturgy.⁸⁷⁵ As an established Christian ritual, the Easter Vigil is a prominent and instructive example. The lighting of a ‘new fire’ at the Easter Vigil has a long history within mainstream western Christianity. This ancient fire rite has its origins in the Easter celebrations of the fourth century CE.⁸⁷⁶ The most prominent celebration of the Easter fire takes place in Jerusalem at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, where Orthodox Christian believers attest to the miraculous ‘Holy Fire’ which spontaneously springs forth from the tomb of Jesus Christ on Holy Saturday each year.⁸⁷⁷ The Holy Fire that occurs in Jerusalem is the exception to celebration of the Easter Vigil elsewhere, not least in its apparently supernatural origins.⁸⁷⁸ In conventional Easter Vigil services, the new fire is prepared and ignited outdoors by the priest or church leader. From this new fire, a ceremonial candle is lit. The Paschal candle, or Easter candle, will provide a source of light for the rest of the service. In British Christianity, the Easter fire is primarily found in Catholic and Anglican liturgies, where it fits into a broader liturgical pattern of Easter celebrations.⁸⁷⁹

There is little reflection in contemporary scholarly literature on the imagery of the Easter ‘new fire’ beyond what is available in the liturgies themselves. Liturgist and historian A. J.

⁸⁷⁵ Hastings, “Fire,” 242.

⁸⁷⁶ A. J. MacGregor, *Fire and Light in the Western Triduum: Their Use at Tenebrae and at the Paschal Vigil* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1992), 1.

⁸⁷⁷ Nectaria McLees, “Fire from heaven: Holy Saturday at the Lord's tomb.” *Road To Emmaus* 1, no. 1 (2000): 4, accessed February 19 2018, <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rft&AN=ATLA0001849216&site=eds-live>.

⁸⁷⁸ McLees, “Fire from heaven,” 5.

⁸⁷⁹ The source texts examined below use *The Roman Missal* and texts from The Church of England's *Common Worship*.

MacGregor conducted detailed research on the development and practice of the western Triduum tradition in a study published in 1992, which focuses on the historical and ecclesial aspects of the rite but does not seek to analyse the imagery in depth.⁸⁸⁰ *The New SCM Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship* barely acknowledges the new fire at Easter, although the symbolism of the Paschal candle is briefly explored.⁸⁸¹ Where the new fire is mentioned — under the entries ‘Easter Candle,’ and ‘New Fire’ — its function as a theological image is not identified.⁸⁸² Not coincidentally, the two entries which deal with the new fire were authored by A. J. MacGregor. They provide informative summaries of his aforementioned research, but do not suggest any major developments in contemporary thought. MacGregor uses only two references for these entries, the most recent of which is his own volume. The fact that a more recent source is not given is illustrative of the difficulty finding relevant research on Easter fire. In the 1992 volume *The Study of Liturgy*, liturgist Peter G. Cobb finds no particular significance in the imagery of the new fire beyond what is made explicit in the liturgical texts.⁸⁸³ With only limited source material from which to draw, Hazel Rossotti offers only the briefest study of the Easter Vigil in her survey of fire in modern Britain.⁸⁸⁴

Regardless of the degree of interest from within the academy, the Easter Vigil has a firm place within the Anglo-Catholic *Triduum*, which marks the final three days of the Easter season. The beginning of the Easter Vigil, which includes the new fire, is referred to as the *Lucernarium*.⁸⁸⁵ The Easter fire is generally kindled in the open air, where the ‘flames should

⁸⁸⁰ MacGregor, *Fire and Light*.

⁸⁸¹ Bradshaw, *Liturgy and Worship*, s.v. “Easter.”

⁸⁸² Ibid., s.v. “Easter Candle”; “New Fire.”

⁸⁸³ Peter G. Cobb, “The History of the Christian Year,” in *The Study of Liturgy*, ed. Cheslyn Jones, Geoffrey Wainwright, Edward Yarnold S. J., and Paul Bradshaw (London: SPCK; New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 463.

⁸⁸⁴ Rossotti, *Fire*, 248.

⁸⁸⁵ “The Easter Vigil,” excerpt from *The Roman Missal*, 3rd ed., Liturgy Office England and Wales, accessed 4 June 2016, <http://www.romanmissal.org.uk/content/download/28374/193449/file/Vigil-Beginning.pdf>.

be such that they genuinely dispel the darkness and light up the night.’⁸⁸⁶ In this vein, the Roman Catholic liturgical text of the Roman Missal calls for ‘a blazing fire’ which is to be blessed by the officiant.⁸⁸⁷ The congregation gathers around the fire and, after the lighting of the Paschal candle, forms a procession which follows the candle into the church. Coals from the new fire are placed within a censer, and incense is burned using the heat of the new fire.⁸⁸⁸ The senses are engaged by the use of the new fire: sounds of burning are heard at the same time as the liturgy is spoken, and the smells of the fire are incorporated into the service using incense.

In the Church of England, the new fire is an optional component of the Easter liturgy.⁸⁸⁹ The Easter Vigil leads on to the Service of Light, which may itself lead on to liturgies of baptism and/or the Eucharist. The exact nature of how the Easter liturgy is celebrated depends on individual church preference.⁸⁹⁰ Broadly, there are three patterns described in the liturgical texts. Pattern A in the Easter Vigil liturgy follows the shape of the *Lucernarium*, and communicates theological ideas through a ‘light ceremony’ which uses the new fire as the source of physical and symbolic illumination.⁸⁹¹ Pattern B utilises ‘a storytelling approach’ in which participants gather around a fire for an extended time of prayer, Bible readings, and creative worship. (In this model, the fire only becomes the Easter fire when it is blessed at the outset of the Service of Light.)⁸⁹² Finally, the Dawn Service pattern offers an adaptable mode of outdoor worship on Easter morning, where the Paschal candle is lit from the new fire as the sun rises.⁸⁹³

⁸⁸⁶ “On Preparing and Celebrating the Paschal Feasts (1988): Triduum,” Liturgy Office England and Wales, accessed 5 June 2017, <http://www.liturgyoffice.org.uk/Calendar/Seasons/Documents/TriduumPF.shtml#HolySaturday>.

⁸⁸⁷ “Easter Vigil,” 378.

⁸⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 380.

⁸⁸⁹ See “The Easter Liturgy,” The Church of England, accessed 4 June 2016, <https://www.churchofengland.org/media/41157/tseasterlit.pdf>.

⁸⁹⁰ “Easter Liturgy,” 327.

⁸⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 324.

⁸⁹² *Ibid.*, 324-5.

⁸⁹³ *Ibid.*, 325; 398.

The Easter Vigil service may take place on Holy Saturday, usually after dark, or alternatively by dawn on Easter Sunday. The Easter fire is usually kindled outdoors in a brazier, or as a bonfire.⁸⁹⁴ The new fire provides the physical and symbolic source for subsequent ritual actions, namely the lighting of the Paschal candle and candlelight procession. As in the case of the Olympic and Paralympic lighting ceremonies, the source of the image is symbolically significant. The liturgies require the rite to be completed after dark or before dawn; the physical and liturgical setting for the Easter Vigil is darkness.⁸⁹⁵ Formerly in the Triduum, the Easter Vigil followed a ceremonial extinguishing of light in the church during *Tenebrae*, a service held on a day prior to the Vigil.⁸⁹⁶ This meant that the new fire inaugurated the symbolic return of light to the church. Present-day forms of the Vigil use fire as the primary source of illumination for an otherwise unlit space. In the Triduum and Pattern A in the Church of England, prayers around the new fire are followed by a procession into the church headed by the Paschal candle. When the new fire is part of the proceedings, it forms the origination point of the Paschal candle, which is explicitly identified with the resurrected Christ.⁸⁹⁷

Christopher Irvine, writing for the Anglican *Alcuin Liturgy Guides* series, argues that the Paschal candle is the principal symbol of the Easter Vigil and thus should not be ‘dwarfed’ by a large Easter fire.⁸⁹⁸ Within a western Anglican context, he argues, the new fire serves as way to ignite the Paschal candle and should not be treated as ‘a spectacle in itself.’⁸⁹⁹ He argues that the light symbolism of the candle should be given precedence throughout the Easter Vigil service. In addition, Irvine objects to ‘the absurdity of a minister attempting to light a candle from a furiously burning fire’ at such a solemn occasion.⁹⁰⁰ He advocates that

⁸⁹⁴ See Appendix 6.4 for an example of the new fire kindled in a brazier for the Easter Vigil service.

⁸⁹⁵ “Easter Liturgy,” 326; 398; “Triduum.”

⁸⁹⁶ For a detailed study on *Tenebrae* and the historical development of the Easter Vigil, see MacGregor, *Fire and Light*.

⁸⁹⁷ “Easter Vigil,” 379.

⁸⁹⁸ Irvine, *Symbols*, 70.

⁸⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

the congregation observe the lighting of the Easter candle around a small brazier fire and then move into the church without further engagement with the imagery of the new fire itself.⁹⁰¹ As such, he relegates the new fire to little more than a lighting mechanism for the Paschal candle. Although Irvine acknowledges that fire imagery is appropriate to the ‘mystery of the resurrection,’ his approach discourages any engagement with the new fire as a meaningful theological image.⁹⁰² Irvine’s approach thus diminishes the theological scope and ceremonial significance of the new fire as a meaningful part of the Easter Vigil service.

Irvine’s views are not necessarily representative of Anglican attitudes towards the Easter fire. At Salisbury Cathedral, for instance, a substantial bonfire is lit as part of a dawn Eucharist service on Easter morning.⁹⁰³ In a strongly burning fire, the divine source for Christ’s light is not depicted as meagre but as ‘blazing.’⁹⁰⁴ A bonfire provides a good deal of heat as well as illumination. In addition to the celebratory overtones of a bonfire, the warmth of a larger fire recalls the associations of hearth and home in the social imagination.⁹⁰⁵ Used in this way, the new fire has the potential to be an impressive and welcoming image. It is not abstract, but invites sensory and physical participation in the rite.

The death and resurrection of Christ is a defining narrative of the Church. In the Triduum and Easter liturgy, the story of Easter is told, in part, through the use of fire imagery. The kindling of the new fire communicates an end to the Lenten season’s darkness by illuminating the physical space and the proceedings of the service. Participants are reliant upon the new fire to navigate the ritual as it unfolds. The new fire generates a central image around which other ritual actions are organised. Where the Paschal candle is used, its ignition from the new fire is a significant moment in the ritual. The Paschal candle is taken to represent the incarnation and resurrection of Christ.⁹⁰⁶ Hence, the candle flame is

⁹⁰¹ Irvine, *Symbols*, 70.

⁹⁰² Ibid.

⁹⁰³ For images of the Easter bonfire at Salisbury Cathedral, see “Easter Day Dawn Eucharist,” Salisbury Cathedral, last modified 5 April 2015, <http://www.salisburycathedral.org.uk/news/easter-day-dawn-eucharist>.

⁹⁰⁴ As described in the Roman Missal: “Easter Vigil,” 378.

⁹⁰⁵ See Chapter 3.

⁹⁰⁶ Bradshaw, *Liturgy and Worship*, 161.

interpreted by the liturgy as an image of ‘the light of Christ rising in glory.’⁹⁰⁷ Within the Dawn Service pattern, it is suggested that the new fire is lit at sunrise to reinforce the spiritual illumination of the Resurrection on a macro scale.⁹⁰⁸

In each liturgical pattern of the Easter Vigil, the lighting of the Easter fire ‘marks the end of the emptiness of Holy Saturday’ and prepares the congregation for the celebrations of Easter Day.⁹⁰⁹ The Lenten period has ended but the full celebration of Easter Sunday is yet to come. Liminality is at work in the Easter Vigil, where the congregation gathers in a location other than their usual meeting place — perhaps in the church grounds, perhaps on a hillside or beach — and encounters the unfamiliar experience of a bonfire or brazier as part of their worship. The Dawn Vigil pattern in the Church of England’s Easter Vigil liturgy suggests locating the dawn service outdoors in places of local significance, an approach utilised by St Mary’s Church, Lindisfarne. Here the new fire is lit on St Cuthbert’s beach, a location which embraces the island community’s relationship to the sea and links the celebrations to the religious history of Lindisfarne.⁹¹⁰ At the beginning of the Vigil, the congregation meets outside normal structures, both in terms of the activity and the location. The new fire provides a means to reorientate towards the approaching Easter Day while the congregation are still within a physical and metaphorical experience of Holy Saturday night. In the dawn service, the congregation may experience the destabilising ‘in between’ moments of darkness before the sun rises and the light of the Resurrection is reflected in the world around them.

As well as defamiliarising the location and structure of the church service, the Easter fire also functions as a guiding image which helps participants make sense of the transitional nature of Holy Saturday and Easter morning. In the candlelight procession, participants are literally guided by a flame of the new fire into sacred space. In some services, congregants carry small candles which are lit at an appointed time in the service — for example, after the procession has entered the church — and amplify the illumination of sacred space.

⁹⁰⁷ “Easter Liturgy,” 335; “Easter Vigil,” 380.

⁹⁰⁸ “Easter Liturgy,” 398.

⁹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 323.

⁹¹⁰ “Holy Week and Easter 2017 on the Holy Island of Lindisfarne,” Saint Mary’s Parish Church, Holy Island, accessed 5 June 2017, <http://www.stmarysholyisland.org.uk/EasterWeekPublication2017.pdf>.

Congregational candles are not lit from the new fire directly, but receive the flame from the Paschal candle instead. The transfer of the new fire via the Paschal candle creates a liturgical drama which conveys Christ's role as mediator between God and humanity. I suggest that it is theologically significant that the fire remains undiminished when it is distributed: the congregation receive a share in the gift of the Resurrection without the implication that its divine source becomes reduced as a result. Distributing multiple flames from a single source could even recall the imagery of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, a singular divine presence who appeared as multiple 'divided tongues, as of flame' among the disciples (Acts 2:3). This reading of the imagery is not immediately accessible to the participants, however, since it is not elucidated in the liturgy.

The liturgy provides greater insight regarding movement of the new fire into the church. This is through the explicit identification of the Paschal candle with 'the light of Christ' which it is then distributed amongst the community. Paired with the words of the liturgy, transferring a flame from the new fire to the candle provides a sensory cue that anchors the narrative in a physical reality. The congregation may position themselves within the Easter narrative through their interactions with the new fire and Paschal candle. Hence, the image of fire directs the congregation's understanding of the significance of the Resurrection in their own lives. In terms of salvation history, the bodily resurrection of Christ has already taken place; but the movement of the flame suggests that something of significance is also happening in the present. Fire lends immediacy to the story through its use in ritual actions. The story is permitted to break into physical experience and transform the space by introducing light, heat, sound, and scent into the physical and spiritual darkness. In this sense, fire is physically and theologically revelatory.

The Easter Vigil procession is a firelight procession not unlike the processions of the Beltane Fire Festival, Stonehaven Fireball Ceremony, and Up-Helly-Aa. The scale and materials are different, but in each case the procession marks individual participation in an expression of community identity. The image of a new fire lighting up the darkness provides opportunities for participation in the Easter story by locating human beings within a narrative schema. Once the new fire has been kindled, the officiant appeals to 'the light of

Christ' to overcome 'darkness [in] our hearts and minds.'⁹¹¹ The opposition of darkness and light helps frame a narrative of movement from one state to another: from old to new, from death to life. St Mary's Attleborough, in Norfolk, describes their Easter Vigil service as 'an experience of new life for the worshipper, a passing from darkness to life which offers hope for all the Faithful.'⁹¹² Darkness is associated with sin and death, while the fire and its light are associated with the divine attributes of love, glory, wisdom, and new life.⁹¹³ The light/dark binary is applied to divine illumination of human lives, illustrated by the physical illumination provided by the new fire.

Despite the range of sensory dimensions available in the image, fire at the Easter Vigil is primarily interpreted as a symbol of light. Durham Cathedral's conception of Easter fire relies heavily on light imagery: 'At dawn, a bonfire is lit [...] *symbolising the creation of light in Genesis, and the triumph of light over dark*, of life over death, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ [emphasis added].'⁹¹⁴ Light and life are linked through parallelism, and both are mediated by the Resurrection. Such an interpretation follows naturally from the way in which fire illuminates the service. The procession is sometimes presented in terms of the Exodus narrative, comparing the Paschal candle to the pillar of fire leading the Israelites through the wilderness.⁹¹⁵ Once again, the comparison is presented in terms of illumination or guidance. This is a reflection of the biblical emphasis on the purpose of the pillar of fire: 'to give [Israel] light on the way in which they should go' (Nehemiah 9:12). However, it is due to the narrow focus on light that Rossotti finds the imagery of the Easter procession 'restricted,' since deeper engagement with the multivalence of fire imagery is often lacking.⁹¹⁶ This trend can be seen in dictionaries of liturgy and analytical texts which

⁹¹¹ "Easter Liturgy," 335; "Easter Vigil," 380.

⁹¹² "Easter Night 2017," Attleborough Church, last modified 26 April 2017, <http://www.attleboroughchurch.org.uk/news-and-events/easter-night-2017>.

⁹¹³ "Easter Liturgy," 334; "Easter Vigil," 378.

⁹¹⁴ "Easter Day Services," Durham Cathedral, last modified 16 April 2017, <https://www.durhamcathedral.co.uk/whatson/easter-day-2017>.

⁹¹⁵ "Triduum."

⁹¹⁶ Rossotti, *Fire*, 248.

articulate the meaning of the Easter Vigil without discussion of the new fire.⁹¹⁷ In a chapter describing the Easter cycle, Cobb comments that ‘no significance is attached to the striking of new fire’ and gives no further analysis of the new fire image.⁹¹⁸ Even creative engagement with the Easter Vigil, such as might fit within the Church of England’s ‘Pattern B,’ do not necessarily engage with the multivalence of the new fire.⁹¹⁹

Historically, the new fire was understood to hold a greater range of meanings. MacGregor records a number of interpretations of Easter Vigil fire imagery throughout the development of the Triduum. Medieval theologian Durandus identified the new fire with the love of God and Christ’s crucifixion, while Rupert of Deutz understood it as a sign of the Holy Spirit.⁹²⁰ Bouyur and Diekmann, both writing in the mid-20th century, understood the kindling of the new fire as a metaphor for Christ’s resurrection.⁹²¹ These readings suggest more complex theological associations which incorporate, but are not limited to, light imagery. MacGregor attributes the loss of these interpretations to the ‘simplification’ of the Easter Vigil liturgies following the Second Vatican Council, from which ‘much of the traditional symbolism associated with the new fire ceremony was omitted.’⁹²²

A more nuanced reading of the Easter Vigil emerges when it is considered in conversation with broader theological ideas. However, any theological connections detected in the fire imagery of the Easter Vigil will not be clearly communicated to participants unless they are drawn out through the liturgy, or presented through homily, discussion, or additional resources. This is not to suggest that the Easter Vigil liturgy does not present any theological interpretation of the imagery it contains. Alongside themes of *illumination* and

⁹¹⁷ See, for example, F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone, eds., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 1235. In the entry for the Paschal Vigil Service, the Paschal candle is mentioned in reference to ‘its symbolism of light’ while the new fire is merely listed in passing as a component of the rite.

⁹¹⁸ Cobb, “History,” 463.

⁹¹⁹ McEwan et al., *Making Liturgy*, 95-96. The example liturgy includes the lighting of the new fire and subsequent lighting of candles, but offers no explicit reflection on the associated imagery.

⁹²⁰ MacGregor, *Fire and Light*, 212-213.

⁹²¹ Ibid.

⁹²² Ibid., 213.

guidance centred upon the firelight procession, the Easter Vigil liturgy presents the new fire in terms of *salvation* and *divine presence*. All four of these ideas have been in evidence throughout the three movements of the thesis, intertwining with themes of communication and participation, purification and creative transformation, and fire as presence.

Through the physical presence of fire, ideas about the Resurrection are not presented in the abstract but encoded into ritual actions. The act of lighting the Paschal candle marks the presence and saving power of God at work in Christ's resurrection. When the congregation ignite lesser candles from the Paschal candle, they receive this same power and presence through the light of Christ. The congregation is encouraged to receive a physical reality (the ritual movement of the fire) and thus also participate in the metaphysical reality of Christ's resurrection for the community of faith. Here, a theological proposition is communicated through a simple sequence of fire-based ritual actions which carry lasting significance for the community of faith.

Participation in the Easter Vigil does not indicate fixed community belonging in the way that participation in Up-Helly-Aa or Stonehaven Fireball Ceremony does. The Easter Vigil is open to anybody who wishes to attend regardless of their community associations. A large fire that is visible to the public draws attention to the service, indicating to passers-by that a different kind of Christian service is taking place. The size and visibility of the fire amplifies the reach of its symbolism, suggesting that the ceremony is not limited to those present but incorporates the community at large.⁹²³ Through fire imagery, the Easter Vigil contains a visible sign that the significance of the Resurrection is not contained within the church, but extends out from the community of faith into the world. This message may not be understood by those beyond the boundaries of the ritual, however. Those passers-by who exist outside the particular religious tradition of the Easter Vigil do not necessarily possess enough contextual information to interpret the new fire as inviting their participation. Indeed, the multivalence of fire is such that it could have the opposite effect, appearing to ward off strangers in some mysterious religious rite.

For those initiated into the Christian interpretation of the imagery, however, the desirable attributes of fire help to reinforce the desirability of divine influence. As the

⁹²³ A similar effect was seen in Best's *Temple* (see Chapter 4).

congregation gather, they leave the cold isolation of the dark night to encounter warmth, flickering light, and community around the new fire. In this way, the new fire is similar to the neid fire at the Beltane Fire Festival, which functions as a welcoming hearth for fellowship and storytelling.⁹²⁴ Historically, there is evidence that the Easter Vigil adapted fire elements from seasonal folk festivals which used neid fires and firelight processions in community rituals.⁹²⁵ Neid fires are no longer encountered by the majority of people in Britain, but similar associations may be drawn from social experiences around bonfires and campfires. In general, bonfires are established as occasions for celebration in contemporary British society.⁹²⁶

Participants in the Easter Vigil may approach the new fire with these associations of celebration and community — or, conversely, with a suspicion of fire and awareness of the need for fire safety. The wider context of fire in the British social imagination, considered in Chapters 3 and 4 of this thesis, is thus brought to bear on how fire is received in spiritual practice. Personal expectations may determine how participants interpret the Easter fire. This in turn shapes the individual's response to the ritual as a whole. Since the new fire is presented as an image for God, the participant's understanding of the nature of fire informs how they understand the fire-like characteristics of the divine. This means that if fire is taken to be a masculine image, or a threatening image, then these traits may be transferred to one's conception of divine nature. This may not be a problem in itself: the biblical texts attribute masculine and threatening imagery to God, after all.⁹²⁷ However, over-identification of God with these characteristics may eclipse other aspects of the imagery which would be more conducive to ritual and theological engagement.

As far as possible, church leaders need to be sensitive to the fact that fire may be associated with trauma for individuals, the faith community, and the local community at large. Instead of rejecting the physical presence of fire out of hand, there may be other ways

⁹²⁴ Compare the analysis of the neid fire in Chapter 5.

⁹²⁵ MacGregor, *Fire and Light*, 251; Frazer, *Golden Bough*, 2097-2100. The neid fire is also associated with renewal and the source of new life; see Chapter 5, above.

⁹²⁶ As discussed in Chapter 3.

⁹²⁷ Hastings, "Fire," 242; see also Chapter 2.

to address fear, anxiety, and emotional pain associated with the physical presence of fire. Community leaders might encourage the involvement and feedback of community members so that the community might work collaboratively together in considering these pastoral issues. Participants should be given time to reflect on the emotional complexity of the imagery at appropriate times during the rite. In the liminal tension between the pain of the crucifixion and the hope of new life, the Easter Vigil service is ideally placed to acknowledge the conflicting role of fire in human lives. The resource *Making Liturgy* envisages the Easter Vigil as a time to consider ‘both death and resurrection’ — themes which could be made to correspond with the destructive and regenerative properties of fire.⁹²⁸ Additional times of prayer may help participants acknowledge and process the emotions that may arise. It may be appropriate for some communities to seek alternatives to physical fire in situations where fire is strongly associated with trauma. Suggestions for engaging with tangible representations of fire for Christian practice are provided in the following section of this chapter.

The above analysis of the Easter fire points towards some familiar uses of fire imagery, not only in communication and participation of community rites but in marking a transition in the community’s calendar. In Britain, the occurrence of Easter in the spring positions the festival as a celebration of new life both in terms of the Resurrection and the natural world. The use of fire imagery in the Easter Vigil is used to communicate this new life as it relates to the faith community. Easter fire provides a means for the congregation to participate in the transition from the Lenten season to a new phase of the year.

Of course, Easter is not the only occasion of transition for individuals or the community. Seasonal, communal, and personal change takes place all year round. The following section will consider how the image of fire is used to mark transition and purification in certain creative acts of worship at church services throughout the year. These alternative approaches to Christian practice will suggest ways in which the body can be incorporated into theological encounters with fire. Moreover, the innovation of new rituals gives space to locate the image of fire within sacramental experiences of nature, wherein the liminal traits

⁹²⁸ McEwan et al., *Making Liturgy*, 95.

of fire can be applied to community engagement in contemplation and theological discussion.

Section 2: Fire, liminality, and transition in alternative Christian practice

Transitions in communities of faith are processed using rituals of change, just as in non-faith communities. This section will consider transitional fire rituals within the context of alternative approaches to Christian community and practice. Alternative Christian practice departs from established forms of worship in order to respond to those who seek to engage with Christianity outside mainstream church traditions. Alternative expressions of Christian community and practice often operate alongside more established ecclesial models, and do not necessarily imply the rejection of institutional Christianity. The ‘Fresh Expressions’ movement, for example, advocates alternative forms of worship alongside ‘inherited’ tradition.⁹²⁹ Similarly, some ‘Forest Church’ communities operate within church dioceses, while others operate without denominational ties.⁹³⁰

The role of fire imagery in alternative Christian practice is potentially as varied as Christian communities themselves. However, of the few examples of contemporary Christian fire rituals found in the available literature, token-burning was by far the most common. It is difficult to estimate the prevalence (or otherwise) of token-burning within expressions of alternative worship due to the lack of published or formalised liturgies. Instead, I will offer a selection of examples which will provide an opportunity to assess how token-burning is used and understood within particular faith community contexts.

In its practical application, token-burning is a relatively simple rite which can be conducted using a single flame or a large fire. A token is any object which is used to represent something else during a ritual. A token can be a small part of a larger object (for instance, a scrap of material from a piece of clothing) and thus represent the whole as a form of metonymy. A token can also be an object which contains personal significance, as at the

⁹²⁹ Michael Moynagh, “What are fresh expressions of church?” Essential Fresh Expressions Three-Minute Guide 1, accessed 19 June 2017, <https://freshexpressions.org.uk/resources-3/trying-and-tested-resources>.

⁹³⁰ For a short film introduction to Forest Church, see: “Forest Church: connecting with God out in nature,” Diocese of Gloucester, accessed 30 May 2018, <https://www.gloucester.anglican.org/2018/discovering-forest-church>. The Forest Church movement will be explored later in this chapter.

Stonehaven Fireball Ceremony, or an item with no significance other than what it represents during the burning. Some tokens, such as the objects burned at Best's *Temple*, are concrete representations of abstract ideas, memories, experiences, and emotions. When the token is burned, the participant interacts with the destructive or consuming capacity of fire, but there may be other symbolic and theological resonances at play depending on the ritual context.

Olive M. Fleming Drane suggests a number of applications for token-burning in her book *Spirituality on the Go: Rituals and Reflections for Everyday Living*. She considers token-burning an appropriate ritual for the end of a period of time. At year's end, she suggests, 'Write down the things you want to ditch from the year — and burn or shred the paper.'⁹³¹ In this example, burning and shredding are presented as equivalent actions through which the participant disposes of unwanted influences and expresses a desire for a fresh start in the new year. Drane's year-end fire ritual is therefore reminiscent of the token-burning of the Stonehaven Fireball Ceremony, which enacts the removal of 'the old' to make way for 'the new.'⁹³²

In addition to the end of a calendar season, Drane understands token-burning as one way of 'marking the end' of a phase of life, as at the end of a long-term relationship.⁹³³ In this case, the tokens represent feelings of hurt, grief, and other difficult emotions: 'It may be helpful to write your feelings on paper and shred or burn these sheets as a way of letting them go...'⁹³⁴ However, Drane cautions against destroying 'wedding rings, marriage certificates, or photographs.'⁹³⁵ The emphasis is placed on the consuming capacity of fire, from which objects cannot be reclaimed. Drane suggests the reader might consider 'transforming' items which have carried some kind of significance for them in the past, such as selling the item and donating the proceeds as 'an affirmation of the possibility of new

⁹³¹ Drane, *Spirituality*, 53.

⁹³² See Chapter 5.

⁹³³ Drane, *Spirituality*, 37.

⁹³⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹³⁵ *Ibid.*

opportunities and transformation.’⁹³⁶ Token-burning is presented as a way to ‘let go’ but not necessarily to transform.

Christine Valters Paintner echoes the idea of ‘letting go’ in her contemplative book on prayer and the spirituality of nature. Paintner suggests that token-burning can help the believer deal with ‘the things in your life you want to let go of.’⁹³⁷ She pairs the act of burning with prayerful supplication: ‘As you watch the flames purifying your prayers, ask for the strength to truly surrender those things which have a hold on your life.’⁹³⁸ One creative liturgical resource takes this concept further, presenting a Christian Passover ritual in which ‘symbols of slavery’ are burned to signify liberation from controlling influences and access to God-given freedom. Since fire is required to enact this symbolism, the physical presence of fire is considered ‘an essential part’ of the ritual.⁹³⁹

When token-burning is used as an act of prayer, fire is a readily-available image of purification for the believer. The burning resonates with biblical texts such as Malachi 3:2-4, which give an assurance that the sin will be completely removed by the cleansing fire of God. This is not to suggest that fire causes the cleansing of sin under its own power; rather, the token-burning ritual allows the penitent to undergo a physical experience which corresponds to a spiritual reality. As the fire removes these tokens, so God removes sin. The burning forms a rite of purification in which fire is aligned with divine power and presence, intersecting with the image of God as a ‘consuming’ and ‘refining’ fire (Hebrews 12:29; Malachi 3:2). The vertical movement of flames gives a suggestion of prayers rising along with the smoke, just as Israelite sacrifices seemed to rise towards heaven through the fire on the altar.⁹⁴⁰ Likewise, the image of physical matter becoming ephemeral through the smoke and flames, suggested by Eberhart, could be applied to this ritual act of prayer.⁹⁴¹

⁹³⁶ Drane, *Spirituality*, 37.

⁹³⁷ Paintner, *Elements*, 58.

⁹³⁸ Ibid.

⁹³⁹ McEwan et al., *Making Liturgy*, 84-85.

⁹⁴⁰ Ryken et al., *Biblical Imagery*, s.v. “fire.”

⁹⁴¹ Eberhart, “Holy Smokes,” 29.

Yet token-burning does not cause materials to vanish without a trace: the fire produces ash. Drane and Paintner both suggest incorporating ashes into prayer, or using them as a continuation of the ritual experience. Their suggestions resonate with the imposition of ashes on Ash Wednesday, practised especially in the Anglo-Catholic tradition, in which ashes are applied to the forehead as ‘a sign of penitence.’⁹⁴² For Paintner, ashes can act as a reminder of spiritual purification in difficult times.⁹⁴³ Drane connects the use of ashes more directly with token-burning when offering rituals for dealing with guilt and responsibility. After burning a written account of something which went wrong, Drane encourages readers to ‘use the ash to make a sign or message on paper — something that could be framed to remind you of your decision’ to commit to change.⁹⁴⁴ The ashes of token-burning thus form a tangible reminder of the ritual.

Again, sensory interaction with the image of fire can be theologically significant. E. Byron Anderson argues that the body is a site of theological knowing, meaning that special attention should be given to the ‘the sensory embodied experience’ of worship.⁹⁴⁵ Bodily experience is also emphasised in the Forest Church movement, which embraces a sacramental view of nature, in which the natural world is seen as ‘a form of living scripture’ which mediates divine revelation.⁹⁴⁶ Bruce Stanley, a founder of the movement, describes Forest Church as a loose model of Christian spiritual practice which is characterised by outdoor worship, practiced in the UK and overseas.⁹⁴⁷ Stanley conceives the Forest Church model as a corrective to excessively abstract or transcendental theology.⁹⁴⁸ In the

⁹⁴² “Easter Liturgy,” 222; 211. A Forest Church group is shown celebrating Ash Wednesday around a campfire in an excerpt from *Songs of Praise*, last modified on 8 February 2018: <https://www.facebook.com/bbcsop/videos/1989188161298034>.

⁹⁴³ Paintner, *Elements*, 57-58.

⁹⁴⁴ Drane, *Spirituality*, 141-142.

⁹⁴⁵ E. Byron Anderson, “Liturgy: Writing Faith in the Body,” *Liturgical Ministry* 20, no. 4 (2011): 172, accessed 17 June 2017, <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rft&AN=ATLA0001864269&site=eds-live>.

⁹⁴⁶ Bruce Stanley, *Forest Church: A Field Guide to a Spiritual Connection with Nature* (New York: Anamchara Books, 2014), Kindle edition, introduction.

⁹⁴⁷ Stanley, *Forest Church*, introduction.

⁹⁴⁸ Stanley, *Forest Church*, chap. 1.

introductory chapter of *Earthed: Christian Perspectives on Nature Connection*, Cate Williams provides an apologetic for the ‘earthed’ spirituality expressed by some alternative Christian communities, including Forest Church.⁹⁴⁹ Williams describes the Forest Church movement in terms of ‘incarnational faith’ which resists a dualistic division between the physical and the spiritual.⁹⁵⁰ Working within this model, Forest Church proposes bodily participation in creation as a means of reorienting believers to the possibility of divine encounter within the physical world. Stanley argues that marking seasonal transitions in nature — and using natural images, like fire — can lead to sacramental experiences which incorporate the senses.⁹⁵¹

In Forest Church communities, fire is commonly used as a gathering place for meeting outdoors. The Forest Church services at All Saints’ Harrow Weald have included refreshments around a fire during their outdoor gatherings.⁹⁵² Here, fire has functioned as a locus for socialising and nourishment within the faith community. In a more formal exploration of this theme, Stanley’s book on *Forest Church* suggests conducting a ‘tea ceremony’ in which participants forage for edible leaves to brew over a campfire or camping stove. The ceremony is accompanied by spoken reflections on the idea of ‘regeneration’ through nature and divine presence.⁹⁵³ Through its regenerative effects, fire can be beneficial for the natural world and for the community.⁹⁵⁴ The role of fire in making the tea is not explicitly highlighted, however, meaning that the image and presence of fire are *associated* with nourishment and regeneration but otherwise go unexplored. As with more established Christian liturgies, the multivalent potential of fire imagery is not always considered in alternative worship settings such as this one, but its ritual significance and theological

⁹⁴⁹ Cate Williams, “Contemporary Spirituality, Theology and Nature Connection,” in *Earthed: Christian Perspectives on Nature Connection*, ed. Bruce Stanley and Steve Hollinghurst (Llangurig, Powys: Mystic Christ Press, 2014), 10-26.

⁹⁵⁰ Williams, “Contemporary Spirituality,” 16.

⁹⁵¹ Stanley, *Forest Church*, chap. 1; chap. 4.

⁹⁵² “Forest Church,” All Saints’ Harrow Weald, accessed 12 August 2017, <http://www.ashw.org.uk/page56/styled>.

⁹⁵³ Stanley, *Forest Church*, chap. 6.

⁹⁵⁴ Pyne, *Nature and Culture*, 66-67.

associations may still be accessed experientially within the context of the community's encounters with fire.

Bruce Stanley's writings on Forest Church frames the movement's spiritual practices as responding to (and participating in) 'nature's rhythm.'⁹⁵⁵ For St Albans Forest Church, a well-established Forest Church community, fire underpins the community's engagement with the rhythm of the seasons. Like many Forest Church communities, St Albans Forest Church meets outdoors for worship and seeks to engage with 'creation's annual cycle of birth, growth and decay.'⁹⁵⁶ The seasons are understood to have their own character: 'the height of summer is energizing and abundant and winter is reflective and inward.'⁹⁵⁷ In winter, the group meets around a fire pit in a conscious response to the character of the season.⁹⁵⁸

In our other examples of winter fire ceremonies (such as Stonehaven Fireball Ceremony and Up-Helly-Aa in Chapter 5), the fires of choice are, typically, large and boisterous.⁹⁵⁹ They are used to stage seasonal dramas in which the heat and light of blazing fires stand in marked contrast to the dark chill of long winter nights. St Albans Forest Church has adopted an altogether different posture. They have chosen not to place fire in opposition to winter, instead using the image of fire to evoke the essence of the season as they perceive it.⁹⁶⁰ Fire pits provide a contained, grounded experience of fire in which the fire is sited close to the earth (see Chapter 3). The flames can still be energetic, but they are usually not large in scale, facilitating a more contemplative atmosphere. There is scope for members of the group to gather closely around the fire in relative safety, allowing them to meet with an intimate, inward focus. In sympathy with the season, the image and presence of fire is put to use in generating a 'reflective and inward' gathering for the group.

⁹⁵⁵ Stanley, *Forest Church*, chap. 4.

⁹⁵⁶ Helen Hutchison, "Forest Church," Diocese of St Albans, accessed 12 August 2017, <https://www.stalbans.anglican.org/wp-content/uploads/Forest-Church-article-HH-0816.pdf>.

⁹⁵⁷ Hutchison, "Forest Church."

⁹⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁵⁹ See Hole, "Winter Bonfires," 218; 221-223; 225.

⁹⁶⁰ Hutchison, "Forest Church."

Some of the impulses within the Forest Church movement run parallel to the concerns articulated by the Beltane Fire Society. Early members of the Beltane Fire Society perceived a lack of connectedness with the natural world and seasonal cycles in contemporary society, and felt that this impaired the ability of individuals to cultivate a healthy relationship with themselves and their environment.⁹⁶¹ This concern led to the Beltane Fire Society instituting their cycle of fire festivals, including the Beltane Fire Festival. Tinsley and Matheson understand Beltane Fire Society's seasonal rituals as a means by which groups and individuals process change.⁹⁶² As seasonal rites of passage, the fire rituals of the Beltane Fire Society and Forest Church help participants incorporate changes in their physical and social environment into their communal, personal, and spiritual lives.

Tinsley and Matheson note that in the absence of existing institutional rituals which address the group's needs, new rituals may be created to help process the change, with the Beltane Fire Festival as one such example.⁹⁶³ This observation helps contextualise why movements such as Fresh Expressions and Forest Church are such firm advocates of group-specific models of worship and community formation. Fresh Expressions encourages church leaders to respond to the needs and interests of group members by developing 'communal practices' within a faith-based setting.⁹⁶⁴ Likewise, Stanley is eager that each Forest Church community should conduct its own group-specific rituals to participate in the turning of the seasons.

A common approach within Forest Church, and one modelled by Stanley's volume, is to follow a Celtic-style calendar based around solar and/or lunar phases of the year.⁹⁶⁵ The year is divided into quarters denoted by the spring equinox, summer solstice, autumn equinox, and winter solstice. Further divisions can be made to mark the time within each quarter,

⁹⁶¹ Tinsley and Matheson, "Layers of Passage," 145.

⁹⁶² Ibid., 141; 156.

⁹⁶³ Ibid., 156. See also Bell, *Perspectives*, 264.

⁹⁶⁴ Michael Moynagh, "How to Grow Mature Disciples," Essential Fresh Expressions Three-Minute Guide 5, accessed 19 June 2017, <https://freshexpressions.org.uk/resources-3/tried-and-tested-resources>.

⁹⁶⁵ Stanley, *Forest Church*, chap. 4.

such as observing the cycles of the moon.⁹⁶⁶ Some Forest Church communities utilise the vocabulary of the Pagan tradition for their seasonal celebrations in keeping with their Celtic style of worship. The major celebrations of each quarter correspond with those observed by the Beltane Fire Society. At the beginning of February, the coming of spring is marked by Imbolc, which coincides with the feast of St Brigid and Candlemas in the Christian liturgical calendar.⁹⁶⁷ May Day (1st May) is also Beltane, which ushers in the arrival of summer. On 1st August, the festival of Lughnasadh (also known as Lammas) celebrates the time of harvest. Finally, Samhain takes place at the onset of winter on 1st November, and coincides with All Saints Day in the traditional Christian calendar.

To varying degrees, Forest Church communities re-contextualise these festivals for Christian worship. Likewise, when a Forest Church community applies the image of fire in their spiritual practices, the image of fire is brought into a ritual context specific to that community. The use of fire is not intrinsic to Forest Church gatherings, and may seldom (or never) be used by certain Forest Church communities. However, it is telling that when members of St James's Piccadilly — a Church of England parish church in the West End of London — chose to adapt elements of Forest Church worship to align with the church's environmental concerns, the resulting services were conducted around an outdoor fire.⁹⁶⁸ Within the Forest Church model, the image and presence of fire are available as a means of interacting with both the natural world and other members of the faith community. Stanley's guide to Forest Church does not explore the significance of fire for environmental worship, but makes clear that fire is a resource upon which to draw when developing new rituals and practices which deal with experiences of transition.⁹⁶⁹

Two specific examples of transitional fire rituals come from Oxford Forest Church and Ancient Arden Forest Church. Both rituals occurred in November 2013, and used token-

⁹⁶⁶ Stanley, *Forest Church*, chap. 4.

⁹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, chap. 6.

⁹⁶⁸ Deborah Colvin, "Sermon given by Deborah Colvin at St Paul's Church Rossmore Road Marylebone London," Saint James's Piccadilly, last modified 11 December 2016, http://www.sjp.org.uk/uploads/1/6/5/7/16572376/sermon_given_by_deborah_colvin_at_st_pauls_rossmore_rd_london_11.12.2016.pdf.

⁹⁶⁹ As in the seasonal resource contributed by Alison Eve in Stanley, *Forest Church*, chap. 6.

burning as a way for participants to respond to the transition into the winter months. The inaugural meeting of Oxford Forest Church took place on 24 November 2013, with the theme ‘welcoming the darkness.’⁹⁷⁰ Fire was an integral component of the ritual, which was designed to allow participants to embrace the transition into the depths of winter. The meeting took place in a wooded area, where participants were given time:

[...] to think what we wanted to take into the darkness, what was little and fragile and needed to grow in the dark and what we may need to shed in order to let that happen... [Then we] went back where a fire was waiting for us. [...] [We] threw pieces of rosemary into the fire to let go of anything we needed to [...] as we go into the darkest part of the year. We passed round rosemary tea and chocolate cake to remind us to nourish that space.⁹⁷¹

Like the fire pit gatherings of St Albans Forest Church, above, Oxford Forest Church’s inaugural ritual did not present darkness and winter as the enemy to be overcome by the light and warmth of fire, but a season with its own beneficial qualities. Despite the dormant appearance of the colder months, winter was characterised as a time when growth still takes place, albeit ‘in the dark.’ *Growth* formed an extended metaphor for personal, emotional, and spiritual progress which the participant hopes to attain through the coming season. The ritual suggested that the object of growth needs to be mindfully cultivated if it is to survive and flourish. Sprigs of rosemary were burned to enact the removal of unwanted influences which might restrict the desired growth. As in Stanley’s ‘tea ceremony,’ consuming sustenance around the fire provided an image of comfort and regeneration.

The tone of the Oxford Forest Church ritual was contemplative, making ‘space’ for growth in the mode of pruning a garden. Agricultural overtones may have been present in view of the ritual’s woodland setting, use of plant materials, and framing *growth* metaphor. Instead of purification through sacrificial burning (a concept which has underpinned other examples of token-burning in this chapter), the burning of rosemary sprigs recalls the

⁹⁷⁰ Tess Ward, “Down in the woods yesterday,” *Tess Ward: Celebrant and Writer* (blog), 24 November 2013, <https://tessward.wordpress.com/2013/11/24/down-in-the-woods-yesterday>.

⁹⁷¹ Ward, “Down in the woods.”

practice of farmers and gardeners who dispose of unwanted plant matter using fire.⁹⁷² In the Gospels, the image of burning chaff — the unproductive, unusable part of the grain — is one of lasting judgement (Matthew 3:12; Luke 3:17). For Oxford Forest Church, the emphasis of the chosen imagery rests on the usefulness of fire to promote growth and create the conditions for life to flourish in the next season.⁹⁷³

Sharing food after the burning placed the destruction of the fire in a wider context of growth, and affirmed the social connections of the group as they ate and socialised together. By consuming rosemary in their tea, members of Oxford Forest Church paralleled the actions of the fire as it consumed the rosemary sprigs. The continuity between the rosemary sprigs and rosemary tea suggests continuity between the processes of destruction and renewal: the former is necessary to make way for the latter. It should be noted that these ideas relating to fire imagery are implicit in the actions and overall framing of the rite, primarily through parallelism. They are not elucidated within the available source material.

Token-burning was also the focus of a ritual held by Ancient Arden Forest Church in the West Midlands. The following notice, dated 27 October 2013, was posted by Alison Eve (a leader of Arden Forest Church) to the Forest Church public Facebook group to advertise the event:

Ancient Arden [Forest Church] will be celebrating Samhain on Sunday 3rd November [...] Please bring something with you that represents this past year that can be tied to our wheel of the year, and burnt in the fire as symbolic of moving on into the next cycle of growth — letting go of what is past to make room for what is to come.⁹⁷⁴

The core of this ritual is similar to the one conducted by Oxford Forest Church. Both invite participants to burn an item which represents those things which are seen as a hindrance to growth and development in the new season. The distinctions, though minor, are nonetheless significant. Participants at the Oxford Forest Church ritual each burned the

⁹⁷² As described briefly in Chapter 3.

⁹⁷³ Pyne, *Nature and Culture*, 66-67.

⁹⁷⁴ Alison Eve, Facebook post dated 27 October 2013, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/forestchurch/permalink/508862582554884>.

same kind of token (rosemary), emphasising the corporate character of the act of burning. At Ancient Arden Forest Church, the items were specifically selected by the participants for their symbolic value. The ritual from Ancient Arden thus holds a closer connection to the token-burning of the Stonehaven Fireball Ceremony and David Best's *Temple*, where individual choice was seminal to the personal catharsis enacted through the burning.

Unlike the rituals in Stonehaven and Derry/Londonderry, however, the language of purification is absent in the description of the Ancient Arden Forest Church event. The desire for growth is articulated alongside a metaphoric framing of *journey* ('moving on' towards the new season). Like the token-burning ritual at Oxford Forest Church, the focus remains on the way fire can 'make room' for future growth. For Ancient Arden Forest Church, Samhain is a year-end festival; the group celebrates the beginning of the new ritual year at the winter solstice (which falls near Christmas Day).⁹⁷⁵ Between the two celebrations, there is a 'long dark season of waiting and watching' in which members of the community strive to maintain an extended period of quietude.⁹⁷⁶ Their Samhain fire ritual brings closure to the old year and inaugurates a time of liminality before the new ritual year begins. The new year opens at the winter solstice with a Yule Log fire ritual, which has its origins in Celtic and Pagan traditions. The Yule fire is usually interpreted in terms of light symbolism, where the blaze of a burning log anticipates the return of light after the darkness of midwinter.⁹⁷⁷ Ancient Arden Forest Church has adopted the Yule Log tradition as a time of storytelling, blessing, and liturgical reflection on the light of Christ. The kindling of a fire itself is considered 'a symbol of hope and prosperity for the year ahead.'⁹⁷⁸

Through its presence at Samhain and the winter solstice, fire marks the boundaries of the community's ritual year. Samhain and the winter solstice are used as corresponding rituals in which the image of fire initiates and concludes a time of liminality. The physical presence of fire is distinguished by its noise, movement, brightness, and warmth. The absence of fire, in the time between the old and new year, leaves space for silence, stillness,

⁹⁷⁵ Eve's contribution in Stanley, *Forest Church*, chap. 6.

⁹⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷⁷ Tresidder, *Symbols*, 529.

⁹⁷⁸ Eve's contribution in Stanley, *Forest Church*, chap. 6.

darkness, and the cold of winter. These are not viewed as negative experiences. On the contrary, darkness ‘is a place of learning and growth,’ as expressed by other Forest Church communities above.⁹⁷⁹ The Samhain burning rite prepares members of the community for a period of liminality, and what is learned in that time is taken forward into the new year through the kindling of the Yule fire.⁹⁸⁰ The burning of tokens at Samhain should not be considered in isolation, but within the wider ritual context of the faith community.

It is not always possible to integrate live flames into contemporary Christian practice. The decline in everyday encounters with fire in contemporary Britain has made fire less accessible than in previous generations, as evidenced in Chapter 3. The use of physical flames requires suitable materials and practical knowledge for kindling and maintaining the fire. There may also be legal requirements, such as obtaining the correct insurance cover, risk assessments, and safety training. The following section will address how the sensory dimensions of fire might be accessed for Christian worship when fire is not physically present.

Section 3: Interacting with the image of fire when fire is physically absent

The physicality of fire offers opportunities for bodily participation in spiritual experiences, and provides ways for participants to explore liminal states during times of transition. Fire imagery can be applied as a multivalent and multi-sensory feature of worship even when fire is absent. Such sensory interactions with biblical fire imagery have been explored by the congregation of St John’s, Dumfries, situated in the southwest of Scotland. St John’s is affiliated with both the the Scottish Episcopal Church and the Methodist Church.⁹⁸¹ As part of their Pentecost celebrations in 2015, church members and local school children participated in an installation art project entitled, ‘A Pentecost Canopy of Flames.’⁹⁸² To create the installation, participants were asked to reflect on their experiences of ‘good

⁹⁷⁹ Eve’s contribution in Stanley, *Forest Church*, chap. 6.

⁹⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁹⁸¹ “About,” St John’s Dumfries, accessed 11 February 2018, <http://www.stjohnsdumfries.org/info/sample-page>.

⁹⁸² Simon Lidwell, Wordsmithcrafts Facebook page, post dated 9 June 2015, <https://www.facebook.com/Wordsmithcrafts/posts/915391705170435>.

things' in the world. They wrote down their responses on yellow, orange, and red coloured ribbons.⁹⁸³ The ribbons were then affixed to a large stretch of wire netting, which was installed above the pews in the nave of St John's church. The installation thus formed a canopy from which flame-coloured ribbons hung down over the heads of the congregation.

According to the project organisers, the project captured 'flickers of hope and peace that people feel when they recognise the presence of good things in their life — or see something they are inspired to do something about, and sense the presence of the Holy spirit [sic].'⁹⁸⁴ The ribbons formed tangible representations of abstract ideas relating to the community's spiritual life and experience. The project offered a mode of physical interaction with the fire imagery of Pentecost. The 'flames' were tangible objects onto which prayers and personal experiences could be inscribed, connecting the presence of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost with the participants' ongoing lived experience.

The colours and shapes of the long, draping ribbons evoked the appearance of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, which manifested as 'divided tongues, as of fire' (Acts 2:3). Like the 'divided tongues' of Acts 2, the ribbons were in physical proximity to those gathered for worship and signalled the presence of the Holy Spirit in their lives. Positioned overhead as a canopy, the 'flames' could be seen as being lifted upwards from the congregation in a gesture of thanksgiving for blessings received. Alternatively, the 'flames' might also be seen as cascading down towards those gathered below: gifts given from above.

The imagery and creative innovation of the project associated the Holy Spirit with 'goodness,' blessing, inspiration, and the continuing presence of God in the world.⁹⁸⁵ The canopy imagery could have been applied further to explore the image of Isaiah 4:5-6, which describes the Lord providing 'a canopy' of protection over his people at Mount Zion in the form of 'a cloud by day [...] and the shining of a flaming fire by night.' This passage offers a way to understand the canopy of blessing in terms of a future promise as well as present reality. Isaiah 4:5-6 also recalls the presence and protection of God at the exodus, when a

⁹⁸³ "A Canopy of flames," Creative Worship at St Johns Dumfries, Facebook update posted 21 May 2015, https://www.facebook.com/pg/StJohnsDumfriesCreativeArts/photos/?tab=album&album_id=818453008245053.

⁹⁸⁴ "A Canopy of flames."

⁹⁸⁵ Ibid.

pillar of cloud and fire led Israel through the wilderness (Exodus 13:17-22). Tracing the connections between the tongues of flame at Pentecost, the pillar of fire at Exodus, and Isaiah's eschatological canopy of blessing would highlight the continuity of divine presence among God's people — from the beginnings of covenant to the present day and beyond.

Since the 'flames' at St John's were not actually combusting, participants could interact with the imagery without risk of burning. The imagery of fire which does not consume is not only reminiscent of the burning bush (Exodus 3), but also highly appropriate to the Pentecost narrative. My analysis of the Pentecost narrative in the second chapter of the thesis explored how the fire imagery both upholds and subverts traditional signs of theophany. The association between fire and the presence of God is maintained, and yet the Holy Spirit does not manifest in consuming fire (cf. Deuteronomy 5:22-27). The disciples are not burned by physical contact with the fiery tongues.⁹⁸⁶

Moreover, the biblical account of Pentecost uses distancing language to convey that the manifestation of the Holy Spirit was only *like* fire, not fire itself. The fact that the project at St John's did not involve physical fire meant it could remain as a sign of divine presence in the church even once the installation ended. After the congregation's Pentecost celebrations were concluded, the 'flames' were woven into a textile runner as a covering for the communion table in recognition of Trinity Sunday, with the flame-coloured ribbon symbolising the Holy Spirit.⁹⁸⁷ The imagery is thus placed within a Trinitarian context, in which the Holy Spirit remains in and with the church as part of their experience of God.

'A Canopy of Flames' showed that theological engagement with the image of fire can occur through multi-sensory interactions with fire imagery. That is to say, representations of fire — as well as fire itself — can become the focus of an embodied approach to theological knowing and participation in worship. The imagery did not communicate the presence of the Holy Spirit in the form of disembodied spiritual illumination. Instead, the project brought abstract concepts into the realm of lived experience: God's grace was understood as manifesting in the 'good things' of people's lives. Participants were able to interact with the fire imagery in ways that would not be possible were they handling live flames, while still

⁹⁸⁶ See Chapter 2.

⁹⁸⁷ Simon Lidwell, explanatory comment on Wordsmithcrafts Facebook page, post dated 9 June 2015, <https://www.facebook.com/Wordsmithcrafts/photos/pcb.915391705170435/915390845170521>.

drawing from the fire imagery of the Pentecost narrative. As with burning flames, tangible representations of fire offer the opportunity to explore the image's multivalence and theological potential.

It is possible to engage with the sensory aspects of the image with multiple representations of fire and none. I have provided two sample sessions for Christian worship which demonstrate different approaches to imaginative sensory engagement with the image of fire in a faith context (see Appendices 1.3 and 1.4). The first sample session is a guided contemplation for prayer focusing on the burning bush imagery of Exodus 3.⁹⁸⁸ This session takes inspiration from a method of Ignatian contemplation.⁹⁸⁹ A participant or facilitator selects a narrative to be the subject of spiritual contemplation. This may be a passage of scripture or some other narrative relevant to the faith community, such as the life of a saint, the salvific work of the Trinity, or love's triumph over death.⁹⁹⁰ Participants are then encouraged to place themselves within the chosen narrative and imagine what they can 'see,' 'hear,' 'smell,' 'taste,' and 'touch.'⁹⁹¹ The contemplative exercise I have provided guides participants through the various sensory aspects of the image of fire as a way of immersing themselves within the biblical narrative. This session requires no props or visual imagery as the exercise takes place within the imagination. (As an optional component, the exercise can also be used in tandem with the physical presence of fire if preferred.)

The sensory nature of fire can also be accessed through multiple representations of fire. The second sample session uses a multi-sensory approach in which fire is absent but participants interact representations of fire in a number of tangible ways.⁹⁹² The representations of fire include visual art, wood, ash, food and drink with smoky flavours, unburned fuel, and digital footage of flames. Participants of this session are encouraged to interact with the chosen objects, which have been selected for their ability to evoke the

⁹⁸⁸ See Appendix 1.3.

⁹⁸⁹ Ignatius of Loyola, *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola*, trans. Elder Muller, Christian Classics Ethereal Library, accessed 27 January 2018, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/ignatius/exercises.pdf>.

⁹⁹⁰ For examples, see Ignatius, *Spiritual Exercises*, 43; 45; 50.

⁹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁹⁹² See Appendix 1.4.

sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and functions of fire. Participants are given time to consider various aspects of fire through these physical sensations. The multiplicity of these representations showcases the multivalent nature of fire as each object draws attention to a different facet of combustion. Participants use this multi-sensory, multifaceted experience to consider the correspondences they perceive between the nature of fire and the character of God.

Since the image of fire is constructed with reference to lived experience, a purely visual representation of fire will not necessarily elicit a sense of fire's physicality. The absence of fire in many areas of daily life has reduced, but not eradicated, the immediacy of the sensory dimensions of fire in contemporary experience. My survey of contemporary encounters with fire in Chapter 3 indicated that celebratory bonfires, outdoor cooking fires, and educational exhibits allow people to access the sensory dimensions of fire even where fire is not a vital part of their domestic life. Nevertheless, fire is more frequently mediated through purely visual means: imagery on fire safety signs, footage on film and television, digital versions of fire, and portrayals through artworks, photographs, and news reports. Multi-sensory approaches to fire imagery serve to remind participants of the physical dimensions of fire. Just as the live flames invite bodily participation in fire rituals, so imaginative engagement with the physicality of fire can draw participants into an embodied experience of worship.

Chapter Conclusion

The Christian fire practices discussed above demonstrate that the presence of fire can deepen Christian ritual experience. However, the physical presence of fire does not guarantee imaginative engagement with the multivalence of the image. The written materials which accompany Christian fire practices (in the form of liturgy, resource books, or social media) provide little reflection regarding the theological significance of fire as it is used within the rite. The lack of elucidation in the source materials may indicate that the multivalence of the image has not been fully recognised, or may have been resisted. Engaging with the full multivalence of the image evokes challenging associations of destruction, death, and hell fire.⁹⁹³ An emphasis on light symbolism, as in the Easter Vigil liturgies, provides a more

⁹⁹³ See Chapter 3.

straightforward theological connection to spiritual illumination. However, as I have argued throughout the thesis, the image of fire is more complex than this light/dark binary, with a wider range of associations present in the social and theological imagination.

The multivalence of fire imagery may thus go unexplored despite the range of theological meaning available. Although participants access the image through the direct experience of fire, they tend not to be presented with vocabulary which might enable them to articulate their experience and share it with others. Despite this apparent lack of theoretical engagement, Christian fire practices do convey meaning. The image of fire is used to express Christian narratives and invite participation in worship, as well as affirm a sense of belonging within the community of faith. In this sense, Christian fire practices are not dissimilar to other forms of community fire rituals, which employ fire as a means of communicating and consolidating aspects of community identity.

The physical presence of fire enhances the role of fire imagery in contemporary Christian settings by providing access to the many facets of the image's physical 'source.' In the absence of physical fire, there may be a tendency to reduce engagement with the image's multivalence. By contrast, a multi-sensory approach to the image of fire invites the participant to become holistically involved in the theological task of processing and interpreting meaning in fire rituals, using body as well as mind. The presence of fire can also help to generate liminal space within which participants may engage in ritual actions and move into a different phase of identity and/or ritual practice. This facet of fire in ritual was much in evidence during our case studies, especially in the experiences of transition reported by Beltane Fire Festival participants.⁹⁹⁴ Christian devotional resources such as those by Paintner and Drane illustrate that physical interactions with fire can also be used as occasions for self-reflection and transition within Christian practice.⁹⁹⁵

For those concerned about the theological implications of fire in Christian worship, the image of fire can be put to a straightforward liturgical use in token-burning for confession, where the flames are aligned with God's 'consuming fire.' In contexts where fire is usually treated with suspicion for its destructive capacity, token-burning for confession makes

⁹⁹⁴ Tinsley and Matheson, "Layers of Passage," 150-151; "A Wave from Water Point."

⁹⁹⁵ Paintner, *Elements*, 45-74; Drane, *Spirituality*, 37; 54; 141.

destruction a welcome element of the process. This may be one reason token-burning is a recurrent theme in contemporary Christian resources which include the use of fire. It is easy to frame within the dominant Christian readings of fire imagery as illustrative of judgement and/or refining and purification. When presented in this way, token-burning does not demand special engagement with the theological range of the image. The physical removal of the tokens corresponds clearly enough to the removal of the sin which the tokens represent.

It is not difficult to find a scriptural precedent for such a reading of the image, especially in the Gospel sayings of Jesus where iniquity is to be consumed in everlasting fire (e.g. Mark 9:43; Luke 12:51). Where tokens are taken to represent harmful influences over a person's life, their burning connotes freedom in keeping with the Easter and Passover narratives. Prayers committed to God through the flames constitute an act which recalls the burnt offerings of an altar sacrifice. Additionally, Forest Church communities have applied the image of fire within a framework of growth — thus subverting dominant associations with the destructiveness of fire.

In many Forest Church faith communities, the image of fire has been liberated from traditional binaries of Christian imagery, so that it no longer sits within the landscape of light vs. dark, good vs. evil, life vs. death. The life-giving and destructive capacities of fire are understood as two sides of the same coin, interlinked and inseparable. Like the ritual narrative of the Beltane Fire Festival, Forest Church communities have shown that it is possible to unite concepts which are normally treated as irreconcilable. The image of fire is thus emancipated, at least in part, from established symbolic associations, widening the scope for theological exploration of fire imagery in Christian practice.

Alternative approaches to Christian ritual, such as those utilised by Forest Church, provide precedents for communities of faith which have chosen to innovate rituals centred around the presence of fire. Alison Eve Cudby employs the language of the 'in-between' to describe the development of 'earthed' rituals outside the concrete structures of formal Christianity.⁹⁹⁶ The environmentally-focused rituals of Forest Church contain a critique of a spirituality which is disconnected from nature, and yet they are not necessarily in opposition

⁹⁹⁶ Alison Eve Cudby, "The Sacred Circle: Elements of Ritual," in *Earthed: Christian Perspectives on Nature Connection*, ed. Bruce Stanley and Steve Hollinghurst (Llangurig, Powys: Mystic Christ Press, 2014), 245.

to traditional religious structures.⁹⁹⁷ As a natural phenomenon, fire can be used to affirm a spiritual connection with the natural world and contemplate its value as God's creation. The adaptation of existing rites, or the innovation of new ones, enables the group to address transitions in a way that (re)constructs communal identity and offer 'a depth of expression' not otherwise available to the group.⁹⁹⁸

The involvement of the body in sacramental experience has wide-ranging theological implications, not least in ensuring a holistic perspective which acknowledges the embodied nature of theological anthropology. After all, ritual practice is apprehended and internalised through the body. When the penitent submits a token of their confession to the fire, they experience fire as an active presence which causes the token to change state. Their confession is consumed by the flames, and they perceive a physical process of transformation which reflects a spiritual process of purification and transition. The presence of fire actively contributes to the theological range of the image through experiential knowledge of the consuming flames. In such actions, the presence of fire in ritual gives tangible expression to an intangible process.

Interpreting fire imagery in Christian ritual requires careful consideration of the symbolic and theological frameworks within which it is presented, with the acknowledgement that these frameworks vary between rituals, between communities, and between individual participants. In addition, Christian communities require appropriate interpretive tools to facilitate more sophisticated theological encounters with the image of fire. The concluding chapter will offer suggestions for communities seeking to develop such interpretive tools and theological frameworks in their own spiritual practices. I will invite readers to contemplate the wide-ranging theological resonances of fire, with a view to becoming more conversant with the multivalence of fire imagery as it relates to theological interpretation and reflection.

⁹⁹⁷ As per Hausner, *Spirits*, 15-16.

⁹⁹⁸ Stanley, *Forest Church*, chap. 6.

Chapter 7: Thesis Conclusion

In this final chapter, I will present my conclusions for integrating the image of fire more fully into Christian practice. By virtue of its multivalence, the meanings and applications of the image of fire are broad in scope. The normative physical and social experience of fire underpin much of how the image is understood, and yet the image of fire has the potential to communicate a range of meanings which extend beyond fire's everyday applications. Its significance in a particular setting is derived not from a pre-determined list of connotations or linguistic traits but through a dynamic conceptual process.⁹⁹⁹ As the thesis progressed through its three movements of orientation, observation, and application, we saw how cultural context provides the wider conceptual backdrop for the image of fire. Within this general framework, the image can then be interpreted according to its social setting and, where relevant, its ritual environment. Individual experience and personal associations are also brought to bear on the image, although not always consciously.

In my conclusion, I will present suggestions for developing interpretive tools which consider the image of fire according to these various layers of context. I will begin with an overview of how cultural, social, and ritual settings informed the interpretive framework for fire imagery within my chosen examples, drawing together the three movements of the thesis. I will then suggest that scholars and practitioners can create a more expansive imaginative context for the image of fire by engaging with the theological resonances that have emerged through my research. Finally, I will offer recommendations for Christians who wish to engage with the image of fire in the context of their own faith communities.

⁹⁹⁹ Cf. Geertz, *Interpretation*, 91-92.

1. Cultural, social, and ritual settings for fire imagery

In the opening movement of the thesis, I began by orientating the reader to the image of fire in biblical texts and the contemporary British social imagination. The contrasts between the two indicated that the image of fire is subject to cultural variations. Biblical texts draw on experiences of fire in everyday life to create imagery which is at times congruent with the experience of ancient biblical cultures and at others undermines audience expectations. This distinction may be difficult to detect for contemporary interpreters of the Bible, whose daily experience of fire is markedly different from that of ancient Israel and first-century Palestine.

A particular presentation of fire imagery can mean different things to different communities in view of local culture and social history. Variations in meaning are held together by the structures of the ceremonial setting, which allow each part of the imagery to be interpreted in view of the entire performance as it unfolds. Such multiplicity resists any attempt to simplify the imagery to one cohesive symbolic function.¹⁰⁰⁰ Because of this, there is greater scope for participants to construct meaning as they encounter the variety within the image.

In the latter two movements of the thesis, I demonstrated that both community context and the ritual environment play an integral part in the meaning-making process. David Best's *Temple* indicated that established meanings can be subverted and critiqued through counter-practices which communicate new ideas through engagement with existing imagery. *Temple* re-applied, and re-interpreted, elements of the Northern Irish bonfire tradition by situating the imagery within a different kind of socio-political framework. Likewise, the rituals of Up-Helly-Aa, the Beltane Fire Festival, and the Stonehaven Fireball Ceremony are embedded in the history and self-expression of their respective communities, and it is within this context their imagery is interpreted.

There may be considerable diversity in individual interpretation, especially where fire imagery is multiplicitous (that is, occurs in many different iterations). This is exemplified in the manifold imagery of the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games and the heterogeneity of the Beltane Fire Festival. The deliberately undefined imagery at Up-Helly-Aa also indicates the possibility for varying interpretations by individuals within the same community.

¹⁰⁰⁰ Turner, "Symbolic Studies," 154-155.

In both ritual practice and everyday experience, the image of fire is also construed in conversation with the construction of gender, especially masculinity and maleness. My analysis has shown that certain masculinised rites of passage, like the Eleventh Night bonfires and Lerwick's Up-Helly-Aa, use fire to express power, warlike behaviours, and readiness for conflict. Even at the Beltane Fire Festival, where fire imagery is applied to masculine, feminine, and ungendered entities, the wildness and wanton destruction of fire are attributed to the Green Man. In the Beltane narrative, the chaotic nature of fire must be reunited with its (feminine) creative potential — embodied by the May Queen — to come into balance and create the celebratory hearth of the Beltane bonfire.

Callum G. Brown characterises fire as the quintessential masculine image.¹⁰⁰¹ His analysis of Up-Helly-Aa spares no room for female participation in the burning rites, despite the active participation of women in the regional festivals. The conviction that the image of fire is naturally and universally a sign of masculinity is seldom refuted by academic sources on fire imagery. Nevertheless, the association between fire and maleness is already being dismantled by communities and individuals who choose to subvert established gender roles. The Stonehaven Fireball Ceremony and regional Up-Helly-Aa festivals have successfully begun to integrate women into traditions which were once exclusively masculine. The debate amongst the community of Lerwick about the involvement of women in guizing squads is still ongoing.

Through my case study analyses, I found that a certain degree of framing is necessary for the image of fire to carry communal significance. At Stonehaven, the fireballs may appear to be nothing more than a novel way to see in the new year until the ceremony is framed in terms of seasonal and personal change. Similarly, Up-Helly-Aa can only be understood as a transformative rite of passage in light of the festival's lore. The Beltane Fire Festival, meanwhile, uses a framing narrative to enable participants to make sense of the ritual. The Beltane narrative highlights various significances which may be attached to the fire imagery that the festival uses. The story of Beltane is not immediately available to the first-time visitor, meaning the framing narrative must be sought out by the prospective participant if they wish to engage with the full ritual context of the event.

¹⁰⁰¹ Brown, *Up-helly-aa*, 17.

Framing the image provides an interpretive framework for fire imagery without recourse to a set of predetermined definitions. Framing narratives preserve elements of ambiguity within the image of fire while simultaneously highlighting certain aspects of the imagery according to the themes of the ritual. As contemporary rites of passage, Stonehaven Fireball Ceremony, Beltane Fire Festival, and Lerwick's Up-Helly-Aa utilise the inherent ambiguity of the image of fire to provide room for transitional experience. Through its multivalence, the image of fire is suited to the emotional and conceptual complexity of rites of passage, in which the transitional process is navigated according to a lexicon of symbols and images. The image of fire is thus interpreted in conversation with other features of the communal and ritual setting. Although the Christian tradition has endowed the image of fire with considerable theological significance — especially in the connection between fire and divine presence — existing Christian fire practices in contemporary Britain often fail to explore full extent of fire's multivalence. The Easter Vigil liturgies, Christian token-burning, and other engagements with the image of fire in church worship point towards the theological value of fire in Christian practice. Nevertheless, Christian communities would benefit from a more sophisticated theological hermeneutic which embraces the complexity of fire in physical, imaginative, and spiritual terms.

Taken together, our movements of orientation, observation, and application have showcased the considerable diversity of meaning available through the image of fire. Its applications in contemporary community ritual have indicated that the image of fire can be used to explore a range of personal and communal experiences. Despite the modern tendency to reduce the multivalence of fire imagery to 'positive' and 'negative' aspects of fire, the image of fire has retained the capacity to convey ideas beyond a binary framework. However, applying the image for a particular purpose can be a complex process due to the multiple layers of context which influence its reception. If the image of fire is to be efficacious within Christian practice, communities of faith need to be given ways to make sense of the image within a Christian context. Hence, contextualisation requires scholars and practitioners to examine how the image of fire resonates with ideas in the theological imagination. Theological resonances provide a way to navigate the substantial variation and ambiguity within the multivalence of fire imagery. In the following section, I will discuss the theological resonances which have emerged over the course of my research.

2. Theological resonances of the image of fire

The image of fire ‘resonates’ with the theological imagination in that it offers ways to conceptualise and interact with theological ideas. Within a conventional binary framework of ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ aspects of the image of fire, theological meaning is restricted to apparently irreconcilable categories. In contrast, the theological resonances detailed below are thoroughly interconnected. Theological resonances which may be contradictory at first glance often contain nuances which relate to one another, as in processes of creation, destruction, and renewal. The below theological resonances are neither exhaustive nor discrete categories, but are overlapping dimensions of the image of fire.

There are threads of continuity to be found in how the image of fire is conceived in its many layers of context. These threads of continuity are evident across the three movements of the thesis. They have emerged from biblical texts, British society, and contemporary fire practices. I have described these common threads using three themes: communication and participation; purification and creative transformation; and fire as presence. These themes each contain theological resonances, which I have drawn out below. The theme of ‘communication and participation’ suggests theological resonances with concepts of *illumination (enlightenment; guidance); revelation and divine communication; and community, gathering, and belonging*. ‘Purification and creative transformation’ can be expanded to include *transition and transformation and creation, destruction, and renewal*. Finally, I will discuss the theme of ‘fire as presence’ in terms of its resonances with *divine being and divine presence*.

Communication and participation

i. Illumination (enlightenment; guidance). This is a readily-available resonance derived from a physical effect of combustion. As it burns, fire produces light which illuminates its surroundings. The ways in which the illumination of fire is understood depends upon its qualities in ritual performance. At the Beltane Fire Festival, the light and movement of flames helped attendees to identify, and navigate towards, the disparate performances scattered across the site. The calm, steady fire of the Torchbearers offered an image of gradual, ordered illumination which stood in contrast to other performers who cultivated a thoroughly spontaneous, kinaesthetic relationship with fire. Meanwhile, the behaviour of groups such as the Reds suggested that illumination and personal enlightenment can be

gained through bodily interaction with the presence fire. The 2012 Paralympic Opening Ceremony used the illumination of the Paralympic Flame as a narrative device to communicate the role of intellectual enlightenment in Miranda's journey to freedom and self-actualisation. Intellectual and/or spiritual enlightenment is one extension of the illumination resonance, though illumination need not be conceptualised solely in terms of intellectual or spiritual advancement.

The torchlight processions of the Torchbearers at the Beltane Fire Festival and the guizers of Up-Helly-Aa connote guidance as the illuminating fire leads the way towards the ritual destination. In Exodus 13:21, the Lord guides Israel through the wilderness by his presence in a pillar of fire. This narrative of divine guidance through illuminating fire is re-enacted during the Easter Vigil liturgy. The processional aspect of the Paschal candle uses the flame to light the way forward, presenting the illumination of fire in terms of spiritual and physical guidance. The new fire of the Easter Vigil brings light (physical and metaphorical) into the liturgical darkness experienced by the community of faith. Where the Paschal candle is lit, the new fire is seen to ignite the 'Light of Christ' among the people. The lighting of the new fire during a dawn service suggests a connection between the new fire with the light of the sun as it illuminates the earth. This sets the image within a grander scale of cosmological illumination.

ii. Revelation and divine communication. By bringing light to dark spaces, fire has the capacity to reveal things that are otherwise difficult to perceive. Such revelation of physical realities finds its analogue in the revelation of spiritual or metaphysical realities. At the Beltane Fire Festival, fire is used to illuminate physical darkness, but also as a signifier of spiritual revelation: fire reveals the spiritual forces of the supernatural world, as well as truths about oneself in relation to that world. In biblical apocalyptic literature, fire has the capacity to burn away the old order to reveal the true nature of people and their deeds (2 Peter 3:10; cf. Revelation 18). The connection between fire imagery and the themes of illumination, revelation, and divine communication operate with the sense of 'bringing light' to things in spiritual, physical or intellectual darkness.

Throughout the Bible, the image of fire has an expansive role in communicating theological ideas. Considering themes of fire from heaven, sacrifice, and theophany showed

how fire imagery is used to portray divine actions and self-disclosure, as well as particular aspects of the divine-human relationship. The image of fire is one means by which divine will is revealed within the created order. Heavenly fire is sent in response to human action and communicates divine judgement or approval, depending on circumstance. Fire from heaven punishes the misconduct of Nadab and Abihu in Numbers 16; yet ‘the fire of God’ confirms Elijah’s prophethood in 2 Kings 1. Fire is used to establish the covenant relationship between God and his people and communicate aspects of covenantal expectations. The fires of sacrifice not only facilitate human communication towards the deity, but indicate the acceptance of that sacrifice through the consuming effects of the flames. The image of fire communicates both God’s power and the dangers of being in proximity to the holy deity. Fire is thus an image which expresses the delineation of divine/human boundaries: too close, and the fire burns.

Through fire, divine reality may be revealed to the senses, as well as to the mind and spirit. In the Easter Vigil liturgy, fire reveals ‘the light of Christ’ to the community of faith. The ‘earthed spirituality’ of Forest Church and similar alternative Christian communities use physical interactions with fire to apprehend divine revelation and divine presence experientially. This occurs through ritual uses of fire, in which the tangible traits of fire are signifiers of spiritual reality; and through the use of fire to build sacred space in which other images and spiritual experiences may be explored.

iii. Community, gathering, and belonging. Fire generates social space. Bonfires, campfires, and hearths are associated with the production of warmth, comfort, food, provision, and social contact. These aspects of the image are derived from traditional functions of domestic fire and still resonate within the British social imagination. In contemporary society, fire is no longer at the forefront of domestic life; but bonfires, campfires, hearths, garden fire pits, and barbecues have persisted as occasions for social bonding. The absence of fire in many other contemporary contexts separate fire-based social occasions from other aspects of day-to-day life. The dominant attitudes of contemporary British society — that fire is unsafe and undesirable in human environments, except in the most controlled circumstances — are suspended in favour of cultivating open fires for recreational purposes. In this separation

from daily life, the image of fire holds the potential to provide a setting for the creation of communal sacred space.

Specific uses of fire can become emblematic of the community's identity, being used to delineate the community's values. This delineation occurred explicitly in the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic ceremonies, which constantly reinforced the relationship between their organisational values and the Flame emblem. It occurred implicitly in the Eleventh Night and *Temple* bonfires, encoded in the ways in which the fire was utilised during the ritual. The neid fire of the Beltane Fire Festival, meanwhile, is associated with hospitality, unity, and renewal as underlying features of the community ethos. At the Stonehaven Fireball Ceremony, only residents of Stonehaven are permitted to wield the fire, confirming their belonging to the local community in contrast to visitors. In this sense, the exclusion of local women from Lerwick's Up-Helly-Aa fire festival stands at odds with its ostensibly inclusive model for performing a unified local identity. Yet, as Hausner observes, the identity construction of these rituals is not merely a matter of delineating 'insider vs. outsider.'¹⁰⁰² Ritual is a dynamic process in which the group is able to re-create and renew their identity in ways which allow them to adapt, however subtly, to a new reality.¹⁰⁰³ Nevertheless, in our examples, those who are not welcome around the ritual fire cannot become fully integrated into the community's rites of passage.

The communal aspect of fire can be applied to the community of believers. Open fires can connote the provision of physical, social, and spiritual nourishment, as evidenced by practitioners of the Forest Church model. Gatherings which involve the preparation or sharing of food and drink around a communal fire bring these associations to the fore. In addition, Christian fire practices provide opportunity for active identity construction. Those who assemble around the 'new fire' of the Easter Vigil (re-)construct the identity of the church by re-enacting the Christian narrative of salvation. Token-burning in prayer or repentance may be used to re-affirm one's Christian identity, commitment, or spiritual direction. The consuming power of fire as it burns up the tokens helps locate Christian identity in the removal of sin and anxiety, and the promise of spiritual transformation.

¹⁰⁰² Hausner, *Spirits*, 14-17.

¹⁰⁰³ *Ibid.*, 193.

Purification and creative transformation

i. Transition and transformation. All fire effects some change in its immediate environment. By nature, the chemical exchanges of fire alter the composition of its fuel and the air around it. As such, fire is not an object but an ongoing chemical process. Substances which come into contact with fire are usually changed because of it, as fire can transform matter from one state to another. Fire can nourish soil and form the catalyst for ecological change. The utility of fire for cooking, metalwork, metallurgy, and energy production depends upon the transformative properties of combustion. Combustion can transform something tangible into something ephemeral by converting solid materials into smoke and liquids into gas. Fire itself is in a constant state of change, providing an image which both illustrates and facilitates transitional experience. Through this association, the image of fire is considered a fitting way to celebrate changes in the phases of nature and human existence in contemporary Britain — as in the fiery festivities of Up-Helly-Aa, Beltane Fire Festival, and the Stonehaven Fireball Ceremony.

Fire is an agent of transformation, making it a suitable image for the transformative power of the Holy Spirit. This connection was explored by the congregation of St John's, Dumfries, who symbolised divine presence using tangible representations of Pentecost 'tongues of flame' (Acts 2:1-4). Interactions with the transformative qualities of fire offer an opportunity to explore the human experience of transition. The ceremonies of the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games used the image of fire to create a narrative of human change and progress on the way to personal and cultural enlightenment. In keeping with their optimistic attitude towards human endeavour, the changes brought by fire (and especially the Flame emblem) were predominantly presented as desirable, even if they seemed chaotic at first. Best's *Temple* encouraged the local community to transition out of a state of conflict and into the process of reconciliation and recovery. *Temple* challenged the endless re-enactment of violence within the Eleventh Night bonfires, in which participants actively resist the fire's imagery of transition.

Community fire rituals such as the Stonehaven Fireball Ceremony, Beltane Fire Festival, and Up-Helly-Aa utilise the image of fire to help participants explore the 'in between' phases of identity construction. The unpredictability of fire provides a way of understanding human transitions as dynamic and spontaneous rather than linear or predictable. In Christian

practice, token-burning for confession is used to enact a transition from one spiritual state to another. The image of fire communicates the transformative power of the forgiveness of sin. When the new fire is distributed to participants during the Easter Vigil ceremony, fire imagery conveys the transformational presence of Christ in the world and in the life of the community. Like the Beltane Fire Society, the Forest Church movement connects spiritual change and transformation to transitions in the natural world. Seasonal fire rituals offer a space for Forest Church communities to process these times of change. The presence and image of fire provides a focal point for contemplation, ritual actions, and community engagement with liminal experience.

ii. *Creation, destruction, and renewal.* Fire both produces and consumes energy; it creates and destroys within the same process. As I have demonstrated through my case studies, creation and destruction are not always distinct categories. David Best's *Temple* and the galley at Up-Helly-Aa were burned as creative expressions of human community. The burning of these structures also signified renewal: the old was destroyed to make way for something new, as in instances of token-burning. Traditional fire imagery of the phoenix embodies the interconnectedness of the creative and destructive capacities of fire, and provides a mythic depiction of renewal and rebirth.

Renewal may take place through the destruction of impurities in order to strengthen the whole. Contemporary fire rituals sometimes use the image of fire to symbolise purification and renewal through the destruction of tokens or symbolic structures. At the Stonehaven Fireball Ceremony, fire removes the influences of the former year by burning up objects which represent them. Token-burning in Christian practice also draws upon this connection, where prayers are presented in the form of physical tokens to be tangibly consumed by the fire.

Cleansing and refining are traditionally considered 'positive' aspects of fire in contrast to the 'negative' aspect of destruction. However, I suggest that cleansing, purification, and refining are best understood as constituents of the wider category of creation, destruction, and renewal. Though destruction may be regarded a 'negative' aspect of fire in contemporary interpretation, it is rarely so simple in the biblical texts. As a method of waste disposal, burning destroys the object along with any contaminating materials. In the Hebrew Bible,

fire for waste disposal is sometimes given the additional function of ritual cleansing, as the source of ritual impurity is removed by the flames. The fires of sacrifice are also cleansing, as they provide a mechanism for ritual purification and restitution.

By its ability to remove impurities, fire can sterilise instruments and strengthen metals. The biblical imagery of metallurgy compares the refining of precious metals to the spiritual and moral purification of God's people. The process of refining results in stronger, more valuable materials, but the material must undergo considerable temperatures in the furnace. The idea of refining is thus connected to the experience of adverse circumstances as a necessary part of the process. The consuming power of fire is also an image for death in the Bible. Judgement by fire is usually presented within the context of divine justice, which may also carry an element of purification and refining. The apocalyptic literature of the New Testament attests that the destruction of the old order in fire will lead to the renewal of creation in the form of 'a new heaven and a new earth' (Revelation 21:1; 2 Peter 3:10-13; cf. Isaiah 66:14-24).

Burning tokens to represent 'outsiders' enacts the removal of unwelcome political or religious influences, sometimes to the point of violence. In response to this kind of radicalised purification, David Best's *Temple* can be seen as a form of sacrifice in which something of worth (the aesthetic structure of the temple) is burned in exchange for cleansing and healing brought by the flames. Likewise, the Up-Helly-Aa galley is sacrificed for the cleansing and renewal of the whole community, as reflected in the funerary language which surrounds its burning.

As an image of creation, destruction, and renewal, fire resonates with cycles of death and new life. The Beltane Fire Festival and certain Forest Church communities present fire as an image for the cycle of the seasons, while the galley burning of Up-Helly-Aa points to the renewal of community and local identity. The Olympic/Paralympic Flame is used to express the renewal of organisational values through its cycle of (re-)igniting and extinguishing during each new Games. The lighting of a 'new fire' at the Easter Vigil signals the renewal of divine presence within the church through the resurrection of Christ. Some Forest Church communities consider that destruction can make space for creation and a new season of growth.

Fire as presence

i. *Divine being and divine presence.* Fire provides a dynamic and interactive image for the divine. The connection between the image of fire and divinity is firmly established in the theological language of the biblical texts, and other theological resonances converge within this theme. The presence of God *illuminates, enlightens, and guides*. God's power and provision are seen not only in fire from heaven but through the life of the believer. The indwelling of the Holy Spirit brings spiritual *refining, renewal, and transformation* for the community of faith. When God speaks through fire, *divine revelation* is mediated through the natural forces of the created order. Receiving the presence of God into one's life through faith in Jesus Christ *creates* new life, *destroys* the influence of death, and *purifies* the believer of sin.

The conceptualisation of fire as a unique type of presence is made explicit where fire is personified, such as in the Beltane Fire Festival and the Flame emblem of London 2012. The physical aspects of fire generate a sense of otherworldly presence which is difficult to grasp or define. A fire kindled in a hearth or fire pit invites contemplation and response. Bonfires draw communities together both physically and socially. The burning of Best's *Temple* structure struck awe into those who participated. The presence of burning torches at the Beltane Fire Festival and Up-Helly-Aa transforms two colourful parades into mythic processions. When the Up-Helly-Aa galley burned, the fire appeared to animate it: the galley was endowed with a life of its own even as it was consumed.

The new fire of the Easter Vigil forms an image of divine presence as the source of light and life. The kindling of the Easter fire has been considered analogous to the resurrection of Christ and the life-giving work of the Spirit. Likewise, the Beltane Fire Festival associates the image of fire with the animating aspect of divinity, and the danger of traversing the boundaries between human and divine realms. The Paralympic ceremonies of London 2012 used the image of fire to evoke the idea of pre-existent and eternal force which imbued the universe with life. The Olympic and Paralympic Flame burns out only to be revived in an endless cycle of resurrection. In the same way, the image and presence of fire at Beltane Fire Festival, Stonehaven Fireball Ceremony, and Lerwick's Up-Helly-Aa reach through time in an ongoing cycle of renewal. In these rites of passage, fire has the power to cleanse, animate, inspire, transform, and renew. All of these features resonate with Christian concepts of divinity.

These theological resonances represent starting points for future work in the study of fire imagery in theology and Christian practice. In pursuing further theological resonances of the image of fire, scholars and practitioners alike will find themselves delving deep into the multivalence of fire imagery. Within each of my case studies, fire imagery was not understood *in spite* of the image's multivalence but *in conversation* with it. Likewise, contextualising the image of fire for Christian practice involves embracing the full range of theological meaning available within the image. In the closing part of my conclusion, I offer recommendations for how Christian communities can use an experiential approach to integrate the multivalence of fire imagery into their own faith practices.

3. Integrating the image of fire: recommendations for Christian practice

Engaging with the image of fire in Christian practice

My assessment of biblical imagery and contemporary ritual has led me to conclude that the image of fire offers a valuable resource for faith communities. Interactions with the image of fire can actively contribute to community bonds by creating a gathering space, and by deepening engagement with liminality in times of transition and identity construction. In many of my examples, the image of fire creates opportunity for participation — physically, imaginatively, and spiritually — as people are invited to explore how their conception of fire interacts with elements of the social or ritual setting. For Christian practice in particular, a multivalent understanding of the image of fire paves the way for a greater appreciation of the diversity of biblical fire imagery and promotes engagement with a wider range of interpretive possibilities. In this final section of my conclusion, I will offer some recommendations for Christian communities seeking to integrate the image of fire into their faith context.

The very existence of fire and fire imagery within Christian practice subverts dominant social and religious expectations. In most areas of contemporary life, the dangers of fire are emphasised above all other aspects. Exposure to open flames is thus problematised by dominant associations within the cultural and religious milieux of the participant. It is difficult to reconcile news footage of the catastrophic Grenfell Tower blaze with the creative and transformative capacities of fire. Dominant associations with the destructiveness of fire can easily eclipse the nuances of its imagery within social and ritual spaces. Where Christian communities wish to go beyond the established applications of fire imagery, participants

must undertake the work of recontextualisation, exploring alternative possibilities of the image in reference to its presentation within a faith-based environment.

Throughout my research, I have argued that the image of fire is constructed in relation to sensory experience. When forming a sacred space for Christian practice, the presence of fire can help create a sense of separation from the demands of daily life. Kindling a fire takes effort and intentionality, indicating that the location of the fire has been set aside for a purpose. The physical movement of fire allows the observer to engage with the image as a dynamic, continuously unfolding image. Thus, engagement with the image of fire need not rely on an immediate impression of a static image, but rather take the form of an ongoing encounter with various aspects of physical and ritual experience. This provides the opportunity for ongoing interpretation and re-interpretation of the image in response to a range of sensory information.

The physical presence of fire gives better access to the intrinsic contradictions of fire imagery than a two-dimensional or abstract representation. An open fire is immediate and accessible to the senses, but simultaneously understood to be ungraspable and ephemeral. Because of this, the physical presence of fire may provide a unique way to engage with theological tensions, such as the paradoxical nature of divine presence and the ineffability of divine being. The contradictions of fire imagery may be apprehended through the senses without the need to fully comprehend the scientific nature of fire. Therefore, the presence of fire gives access to the concept of paradox experientially, rather than relying on comprehension of theological propositions. The physicality of fire locates the imagery in the natural world, while the liminality it generates points towards a deeper spiritual reality.

Yet kindling a fire in the midst of a worship service does not provide a simple solution to engaging with the multivalence of fire imagery in Christian practice. The physical presence of fire may introduce another level of complexity for some Christian communities, both practically and conceptually. Live flames raise a number of practical considerations, ranging from the materials required to a suitable location to insurance and risk assessments. These considerations are not insurmountable for Christian communities, as shown in the examples of Christian fire practices in Chapter 6. The physical risks of fire may, however, intensify the community's unease around its theological significance as they are confronted by its real-life destructive potential. The physical presence of fire in Christian contexts must be

accompanied by the underlying conceptual work necessary to help participants understand its value in Christian religious practice.

Community leaders might be inclined to focus primarily on the ‘positive’ aspects of fire to demonstrate its value as a Christian image. This may be a useful starting point for introducing the image and presence of fire to the community, and can provide a corrective to the overemphasis of fire’s destructive capacity. However, leaders should seek to step away from binary presentations of fire imagery where possible. Sanctioning some aspects of the image as ‘positive’ only reinforces that other aspects of fire are objectionable within the Christian imagination. In so doing, the nuances of the imagery are lost and the usefulness of the image is restricted. For the image to be effectively integrated into Christian practice, members of the community must be given opportunity to encounter the image of fire themselves so that they can consider how its various aspects might relate to their own religious context.

Discovering the image in community

Each community fosters a unique physical, emotional, and spiritual environment. What is appropriate for one community may not be for another. Nevertheless, communities of faith might take inspiration and guidance from those already engaged with the task of (re)contextualising the image of fire in spiritual practices. I encourage communities to access existing resources, such as those referenced in Chapter 6, and use them to facilitate discussion and theological reflection. Where possible, meeting and networking with like-minded Christian communities might provide opportunity to exchange ideas and share experiences of engaging with the image of fire in Christian practice.

Several Forest Church groups have taken inspiration from Celtic and Pagan styles of worship, in which the image of fire has an established role in celebrating the ‘cycle of seasons.’ This accounts for the similarity of some Forest Church rituals with those of the Beltane Fire Society. The Forest Church movement’s openness to other faith perspectives has allowed them to interact with the multivalence of fire across spiritual traditions. Such receptiveness to other traditions may be uncomfortable, or entirely unacceptable, for some Christians. Explorations of fire imagery within Christian art, theology, and spiritual writings could provide a useful starting point in this case. The work of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and

mystics such as Richard Rolle illustrate the theological potential of the image of fire from within the Christian tradition. The physical presence of fire can be placed in the context of Christian contemplative practices, as in the example of Ignatian spiritual exercise suggested in Chapter 6.

For some, the very idea of ritual — let alone a fire ritual — may seem incompatible with the community's spiritual tradition and worldview. Introducing a ritual or ceremony which draws heavily from the imagistic presence of fire might be most challenging for churches whose ecclesial model is founded on the tenet of *sola Scriptura* (or 'Scripture alone'). In the case of such Word-based communities, the image of fire might be framed as facilitating engagement with biblical revelation, which uses fire as one image among many to reveal God. It is not always possible to deconstruct the larger contextual issues which determine the reception of fire imagery or how communities relate to other spiritual traditions. For some communities, a more cautious approach might be appropriate, with the goal of building familiarity with the image of fire over time — in ways that feel safe and appropriate to the community's tradition and sensibilities.

Whether through the physical presence of fire or a more abstract representation, accessing fire imagery experientially allows communities to consider the theological significance of fire imagery for themselves. An experiential approach involves creating both a physical and a conceptual space for the community to encounter the image of fire and to consider how it relates to them within their spiritual context. A community wishing to use an experiential approach to explore the image of fire in a Christian context is invited to consider the following:¹⁰⁰⁴

¹⁰⁰⁴ For sample session plans which utilise the image of fire according to this model, see Appendix 1.3 and 1.4.

i) *Purpose*. What is the image of fire intended to communicate or facilitate within the given setting? Fire imagery may be chosen as a way to consider a certain theme (for example, the love of God; suffering; renewal). It may be used to enhance imaginative engagement with a particular narrative, such as a biblical text, the life and death of a saint, or a story from within the community. Its purpose may be to facilitate a ritual, to provide a focus for a gathering, or to build an atmosphere of conviviality or contemplation. These are only a few examples. It is important to be able to articulate the purpose for including the imagery to help address any concerns that arise among participants, and to guide how the imagery is applied in practice.

ii) *Presentation*. How will the image of fire be presented? Communities might consider framing the image by being open about its purpose in the space. This can be done in general terms (e.g. ‘Fire imagery will help us explore our relationship with God’) or with specificity (e.g. ‘We will focus on the creative and destructive nature of fire as a way to consider the paradox of God’s presence in the world’). Be sensitive to the potential connotations and emotional responses the imagery may evoke among participants. If the chosen fire imagery is unfamiliar, ambiguous, or potentially uncomfortable for participants, consider how you can ensure they feel physically, spiritually, and emotionally safe in that environment. It may be appropriate to anchor the fire imagery within more familiar structures, such as a set liturgy or order of service.

iii) *Exploration and response*. In what ways will the participants be able to interact with the imagery? A time of exploration should be available, either as a guided exercise, discussion, and/or personal contemplation on the imagery that is presented. Creative approaches might facilitate imaginative and emotional engagement with the image of fire — for example, creating one’s own fire imagery through arts, crafts, and imaginative description. If fire is physically present, the community might choose to explore aspects of fire through (guided) interaction with the flames. A time of response might flow out of the exploration phase, as participants reflect on their interactions with the image of fire. Where appropriate, sharing personal responses may help the group discover a wider range of potential meanings within the imagery, enabling each member to consider the ideas of others.

iv) *Review*. What effect did the image of fire have within the given setting? Consider whether the group has encountered any barriers to applying the imagery to their faith context. Reviewing need not be a lengthy process, but should take into account perspectives from participants as well as leaders and facilitators. Seek to identify any additional contextual factors that influence engagement with the image of fire. Evaluate these to assess what changes might be needed in future considerations of *purpose, presentation, exploration and response*.

4. Final remarks

Within images, categories collide. Images resist firm categorisation and thus open up alternative avenues of thought and experience. Whether in the form of a barbecue or bonfire, conflagration or single flame, the image of fire has the capacity to evoke any number of emotions and associations. Individuals and communities infuse the image of fire with their own distinctive matrix of meanings. The multivalence of images permits fire to be integrated into Christian practice in different ways, at different times, and to different degrees. In every encounter, individuals and communities have an ongoing opportunity to explore the interactions between the presentation, associations, and context of the image.

The multivalence of fire imagery is not to be resisted in the process of integration, but embraced. Treating the image of fire as multivalent means assessing the various possibilities for theological meaning within the image, as I have done here. Interpreters of fire imagery would do well to develop a methodology which captures the imaginative scope of the image of fire. This can be achieved by exploring the theological connections, connotations, and imaginative possibilities of the imagery rather than attempting to denote its 'true meaning.' Vocabulary is an important consideration here. My findings have shown that conventional binary categories provide an unsuitable framework for the image of fire. Therefore, I call for the rejection of binary language in the study of fire imagery: that is, the discussion of 'positive' and 'negative' aspects of fire which so often characterises theological discussion on the topic. Instead, I encourage scholars and practitioners to cultivate language which is more appropriate to the contextual nature of fire rather than a rigid taxonomy of associations.

The work I have undertaken here combines the perspectives of theology, social anthropology, and ritual studies. The theological resonances of fire imagery remind us of the immense depth and theological richness natural images possess, but the potential of the image of fire for Christian practice can only be fully realised through the collaboration of different approaches. I invite scholars to consider techniques and perspectives from a variety of disciplines in their approach to the image of fire. The practice-based approaches of the arts can helpfully augment academic research through projects which engage with the image of fire creatively and experientially. Scholars, artists, creative practitioners, and community leaders all have a role to play in providing a new imaginative context for the image of fire in contemporary Christian thought and practice.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Text Appendix

Appendix 2-6: Multimedia Appendices

An online version of the multimedia appendix is available here:

<https://rebekahmdyer.wixsite.com/thesis>

Appendix 1.1

Up-Helly-Aa Itinerary

The following itinerary is reproduced from the 'Up-Helly-Aa 2017: VisitScotland's Guide' pamphlet, which was available to visitors to Shetland in January 2017.¹⁰⁰⁵

Programme of Events

0630 The Bill is erected at Market Cross until 1700

0900 The Jarl Squad mark to the Royal British Legion accompanied by the Lerwick pipe Band - starting location varies year on year.

0945 The Jarl Squad leave Royal British Legion and march along Esplanade, along Commercial Street, pause at the Bill located at the Market Cross, then proceed to Bressay Ferry terminal for photos [...] Arriving at 1000.

1030 The Jarl Squad depart Bressay Ferry Terminal for civic reception in Lerwick Town Hall. Throughout the rest of the morning and early afternoon there are a series of visits to the Primary Schools, Hospitals, and Eventide Homes.

1530 The Jarl Squad visit the Shetland Museum

1715 The Junior Jarl & Guizers muster at Lower Hillhead

1730 The Junior procession begins

1850 Squads collect their torches and muster along Lower Hillhead

1915 Jarl Squad & Lerwick Brass Band muster outside Town Hall.

Street lights are switched off.

1930 The maroon [signal flare] goes up signalling time to light the torches, the procession begins with the Jarl Squad and Galley accompanied by the Lerwick Brass & Pipe Bands and followed by the Squads [...] culminating in all torch bearers circling the galley at the burning site and once all gather[ed] the torches are thrown into the galley. There is a short firework display as the Galley burns.

2100 Halls are open to guizers and invited guests until 0800

¹⁰⁰⁵ A slightly less detailed itinerary is available on the official website: "Up Helly Aa 2017," Up Helly Aa Committee, accessed 14 March 2017, <http://www.uphellyaa.org/up-helly-aa-2017>.

Appendix 1.2

Up-Helly-Aa Songs¹⁰⁰⁶

The Up Helly-Aa Song

by J. J. Haldane Burgess

From grand old Viking centuries Up-Helly-A' has come,
Then light the torch and form the march, and sound the rolling drum:
And wake the mighty memories of heroes that are dumb;
The waves are rolling on.

*Grand old Vikings ruled upon the ocean vast,
Their brave battle-songs still thunder on the blast;
Their wild war-cry comes a-ringing from the past;
We answer it "A-oi!"
Roll their glory down the ages,
Sons of warriors and sages,
When the fight for Freedom rages,
Be bold and strong as they!*

Of yore, our firey fathers sped upon the Viking Path;
Of yore, their dreaded dragons braved the ocean in its wrath;
And we, their sons, are reaping now their glory's aftermath;
The waves are rolling on.

Grand old Vikings...

In distant lands, their raven-flag flew like a blazing star;
And foreign foemen, trembling, heard their battle-cry afar;
And they thundered o'er the quaking earth, those mighty men of war;
The waves are rolling on.

¹⁰⁰⁶ Lyrics reproduced from "Songs," Up Helly Aa Committee, accessed 20 January 2017, <http://www.uphellyaa.org/about-up-helly-aa/up-helly-aa-songs>.

Grand old Vikings...

On distant seas, their dragon-prows went gleaming outward bound,
The storm-clouds were their banners, and their music ocean's sound;
And we, their sons, go sailing still the wide earth round and round;
The waves are rolling on.

Grand old Vikings...

No more Thor's lurid Hammer flames against the northern sky;
No more from Odin's shining halls the dark valkyrior fly;
Before the Light the heathen Night went slowly rolling by;
The waves are rolling on.

Grand old Vikings...

We are the sons of mighty sires, whose souls were staunch and strong;
We sweep upon our serried foes, the hosts of Hate and Wrong;
The glory of a grander Age has fired our battle-song;
The waves are rolling on.

Grand old Vikings...

Our galley is the People's Right, the dragon of the free;
The Right that rising in its might, brings tyrants to their knee;
The flag that flies above us is the Love of Liberty;
The waves are rolling on.

The Galley Song

by John Nicolson

Floats the ravan banner o'er us,
Round our Dragon Ship we stand,
Voices joined in gladsome chorus,
Raised aloft the flaming brand.

Every guizer has a duty
When he joins the festive throng
Honour, freedom, love and beauty
In the feast, the dance, the song.

Worthy sons of Vikings make us,
Truth be our encircling fire
Shadowy visions backward take us
To the Sea-King's fun'ral pyre.

Bonds of Brotherhood inherit,
O'er strife the curtain draw;
Let our actions breathe the spirit
Of our grand Up-Helly-A'.

The Norseman's Home

Unknown author

The Norseman's home in days gone by
Was on the rolling sea,
And there his pennon did defy
The foe of Normandy.
Then let us ne'er forget the race,
Who bravely fought and died,
Who never filled a craven's grave,
But ruled the foaming tide.

The noble spirits, bold and free
Too narrow was their land,
They roved the wide expansive sea,
And quelled the Norman band.
Then let us all in harmony,
Give honour to the brave
The noble, hardy, northern men,
Who ruled the stormy wave.

Appendix 1.3

Sample session plan for imaginative contemplation of Exodus 3

Purpose:

To contemplate the scripture of Exodus 3 using imaginative participation through the senses.

Presentation:

Invite participants to imagine what it would be like to be physically present with Moses as he encounters God at the burning bush. If practical, you may also choose to kindle a real fire.

Start with a short prayer time of prayer, inviting participants into stillness. Read aloud the text of Exodus 3. Pause after each verse to allow participants to consider each part of the story.

Exploration:

After the passage has been read aloud, ask participants to consider each of their five senses in turn to help them contemplate the scripture. If there is a fire burning, draw the group's attention to it as an aid to their imagination.

***Sight:** What does the burning bush look like? (Pause.) Are the flames blazing like a bonfire or glowing softly?*

***Hearing:** What can you hear? (Pause.) What does God's voice sound like, speaking through the fire?*

***Smell and taste:** Breathe in deeply. (Pause.) What do you smell and taste as the fire burns in the wilderness?*

***Touch:** What does it feel like to be close to the bush? (Pause.) Do you feel any heat from the flames as they burn but don't consume?*

Participants could consider these prompts silently, perhaps writing down their thoughts; or the prompts could be used to facilitate a small-group discussion.

Response:

Allow time for participants to share their experience of imagining what it would be like at the burning bush. Some participants may prefer to write or draw a private response rather than sharing with the group.

The facilitator might encourage the group to consider what emotions they felt as they imagined the scene (e.g. excitement, fear). Was there anything surprising about the experience?

Read the Exodus 3 passage again. Finish with a time of prayer, asking for God's presence to be revealed to the participants even in the most unexpected circumstances.

Appendix 1.4

Sample session plan for multi-sensory engagement with the image of fire

Purpose:

The Bible uses fire imagery as one way to describe God. This session will encourage participants consider how different aspects of fire can help us understand divine reality.

Presentation:

Set up a number of 'stations' to display various representations of fire. Offer as many different presentations of fire as possible, such as its ability to warm, consume, transform, provide food and protection, and illuminate.

Stations might include:

Images of a hearth fire, a campfire, and a forest fire;

Artistic representations of both the creative and destructive capacities of fire;

A loaf of baked bread alongside uncooked ingredients (e.g. flour, water, salt, yeast);

A warm pot of Lapsang Souchong tea (which has a smoky flavour);

Unburned wood beside fragments of charcoal or ash;

A portable heater providing warmth;

A video of a flickering fire with crackling sounds.

NB. The above suggestions can be adapted according to available resources. If using any materials with the capacity to create fire (i.e. matches or a lighter), ensure they are supervised at all times and kept out of the reach of children. A risk assessment may be required in this case.

Exploration:

Introduce participants to the purpose and structure of the session. Participants are invited to interact with the various stations to explore different aspects of fire. Encourage them to engage their senses through looking, listening, smelling, touching, and even tasting where appropriate. If possible, place a facilitator at each station to help participants engage with the materials.

Response:

After the time of exploration, participants gather together to share their impressions and experiences of interacting with the stations. The group may then wish to spend some time in prayer as they consider which aspect(s) of fire speak to them most about the character of God.

To close, read aloud an excerpt of Psalm 18:5-28 (reproduced below).

In my distress I called to the Lord;
I cried to my God for help.
From his temple he heard my voice;
my cry came before him, into his ears.
The earth trembled and quaked,
and the foundations of the mountains shook;
they trembled because he was angry.
Smoke rose from his nostrils;
consuming fire came from his mouth,
burning coals blazed out of it.
He parted the heavens and came down;
dark clouds were under his feet.
He mounted the cherubim and flew;
he soared on the wings of the wind.
He made darkness his covering, his canopy around him —
the dark rain clouds of the sky.
Out of the brightness of his presence clouds advanced,
with hailstones and bolts of lightning.
The Lord thundered from heaven;
the voice of the Most High resounded...

(cont'd overleaf)

He reached down from on high and took hold of me;

he drew me out of deep waters.

He rescued me from my powerful enemy,

from my foes, who were too strong for me.

They confronted me in the day of my disaster,

but the Lord was my support.

He brought me out into a spacious place;

he rescued me because he delighted in me...

To the faithful you show yourself faithful,

to the blameless you show yourself blameless,

to the pure you show yourself pure,

but to the devious you show yourself shrewd.

You save the humble

but bring low those whose eyes are haughty.

You, Lord, keep my lamp burning;

my God turns my darkness into light.

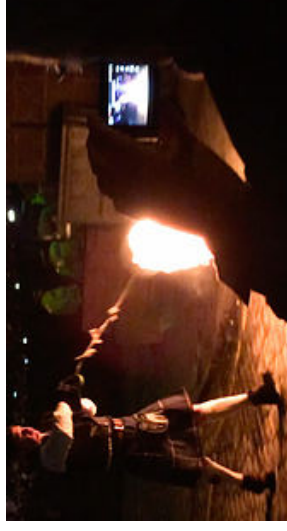
Appendix 2: Stonehaven Fireball Ceremony.



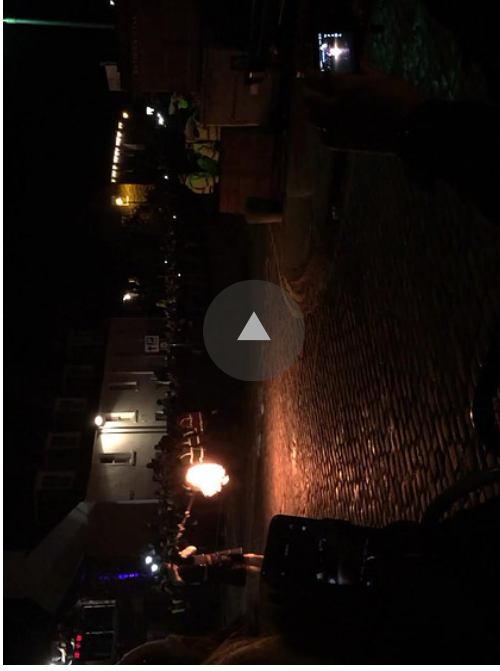
2.1 - Igniting Bales



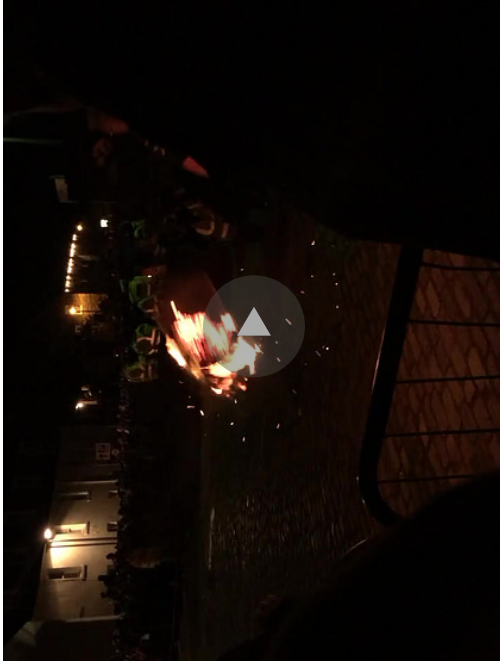
2.2 - Lighting Fireballs



2.3 - Fireball Swinger

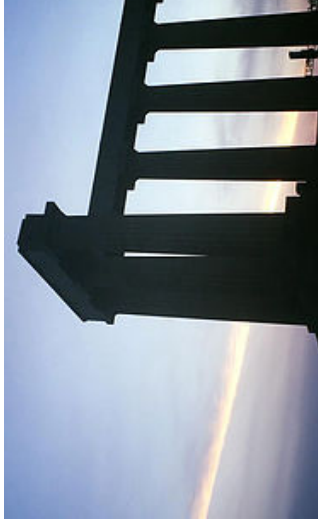


2.4 - Fireball swinging
(video)



2.5 - Fireball cinders
(video)

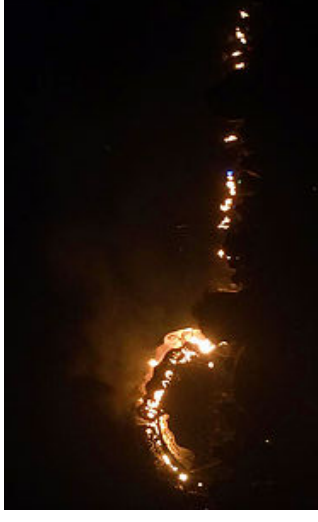
[Appendix 3: Beltane Fire Festival](#)



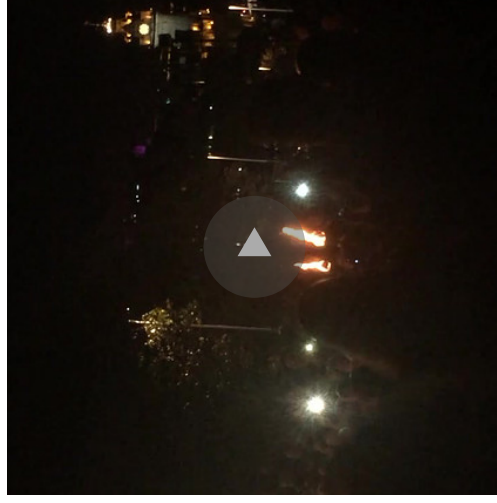
3.1 - The 'Acropolis'



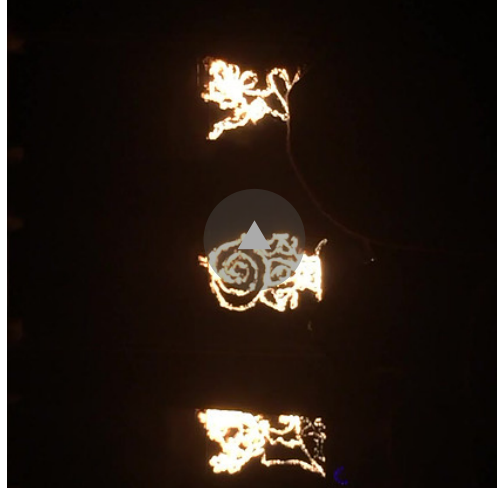
3.2 - Lighting the Sculptures



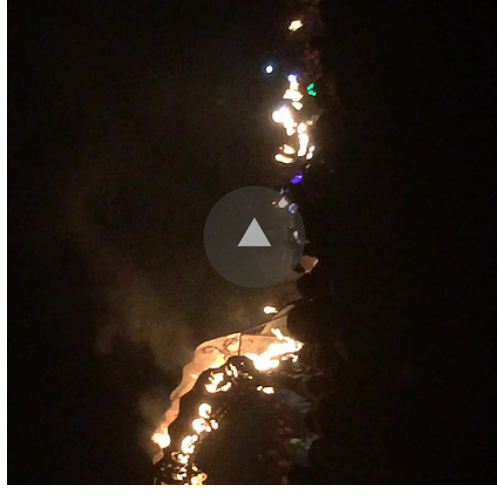
3.3 - Fire Arch



3.4 - Beltane firelight procession (video)



3.5 - Fire sculptures (video)



3.6 - Fire Arch (video)

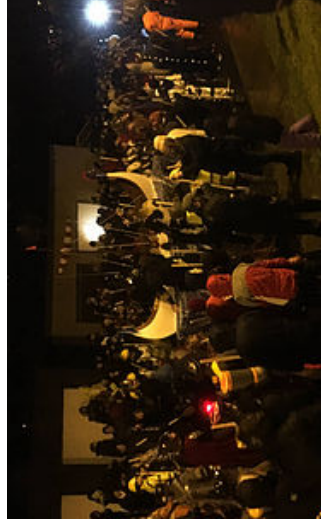
Rebekah Dyer Appendices

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Appendix 4: Junior Up-Helly-Aa



4.1 - Junior UHA Mustering

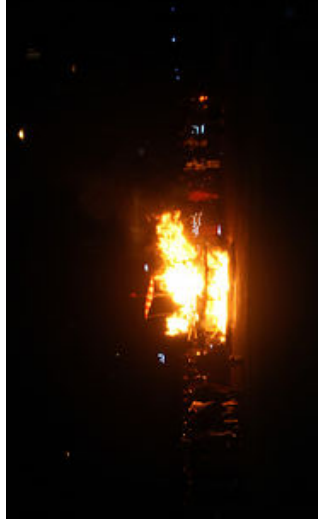


4.2 - Junior UHA Flare

Photo credit: Scott A. McDonald

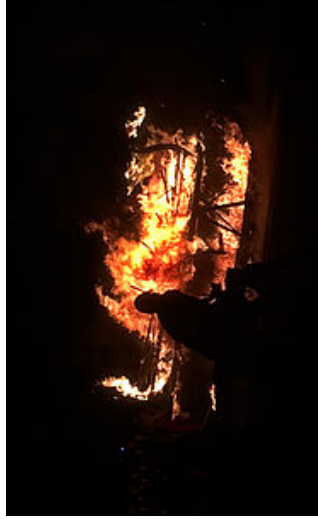


4.3 - Junior UHA Procession

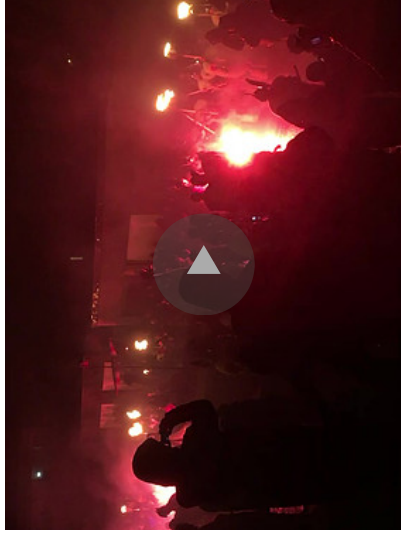


4.4 - Junior UHA Burning Site

Photo credit: Scott A. McDonald



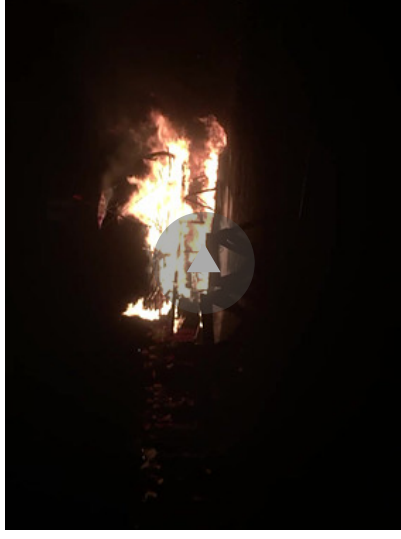
4.5 - Junior Galley burns down



4.6 - Junior Up-Helly-Aa
torch lighting (video)



4.7 - Junior Up-Helly-Aa
procession (video)



4.8 - Junior Up-Helly-Aa
galley burning (video)

Appendix 5: Up-Helly-Aa

Photographs by Scott A. McDonald (except 5.4, 5.8 & 5.9) Used with permission.



5.1 - UHA 2017 Bill



5.2 - UHA Bill detail



5.3 - Museum exhibition



5.4 - Torches (unlit)



5.5 - Guizer Jarl's Flag



5.6 - Shop window display



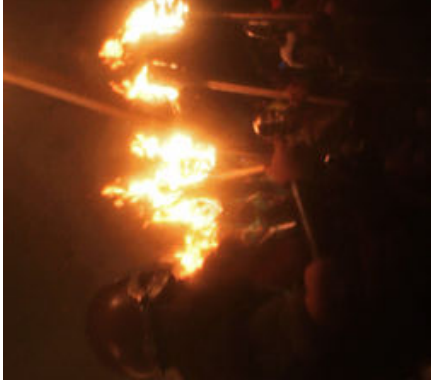
5.7 - Coat of arms



5.8 - Road closed sign



5.9 - Procession begins



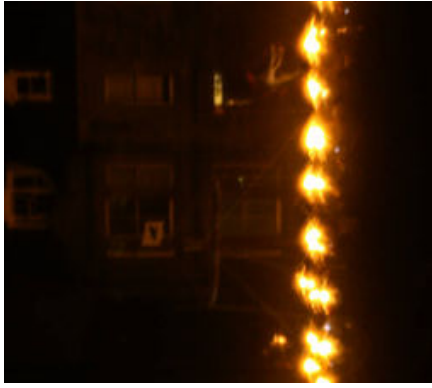
5.10 - Guizer with torches



5.11 - Torchbearers



5.12 - Guizer with galley



5.13 - Galley in procession



5.14 - Galley burning



5.15 - Galley flame



5.16 - Galley consumed



5.17 - Up-Helly-Aa
procession (video)



5.18 - Up-Helly-Aa torches in
the wind (video)

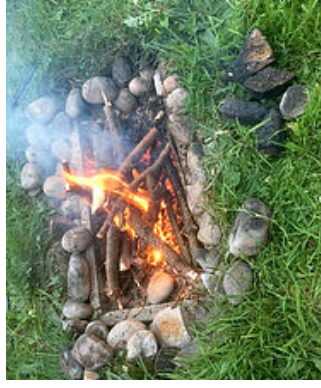


5.19 - Up-Helly-Aa
galley burning (video)

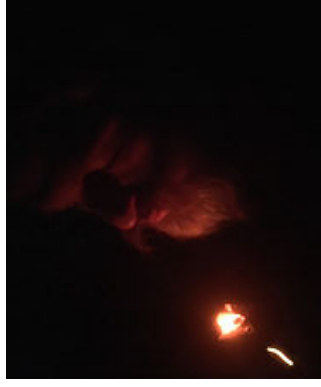
Appendix 6: Supplementary Materials



6.1 - Fire pit (unlit)



6.2 - Fire pit (alight)



6.3 - Blowing an ember



6.4 - Easter fire (brazier)



6.5 - Fire pit flickering
(video)



6.6 - Traditional fire kindling
(video by Scott A. McDonald)



6.7 - Sounds of fuel burning
(video)